いちばんうしろの大魔王 ACT9

水城正太郎

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全ての力を取り戻した皇帝・加寿子に宣戦布告をした阿九斗。この戦いに勝つには、初代魔王ゼロを再び封印し、圧倒的な魔力を持つ皇帝を倒さなければならない。この事態にCIMO8の一人、USDが阿九斗たちにもたらした秘策とは？　想像を超えた舞台で繰り広げられる魔王戦争のクライマックス。阿九斗は皇帝の野望を止めることが出来るのか!?

HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT9

「消え去りなさい」

「これは、マナ・バースト……！」
「狂ったか……！」

「あれが君の言っていた物語か」
「そうだ。物語を打ち消す、大きくて、愚かな物語だ」

登場人物紹介

服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。

紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）

将来「魔王」になると（再び？）予言された「善良な」主人公。初代魔王ゼロ＋皇帝という強力な敵との決戦に挑む。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指し暗躍する。

曽我けーな（そが）

阿九斗に懐いている天然少女。お米が大好き。果たしてその正体は……？

三輪寛（みわひろし）

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。しかしゼロと2Vによりコントロールを奪われてしまう。

木多淑恵（きたよしえ）

2Vに騙され、ゼロ復活の一因を作ってしまう。阿九斗のことを気に入り、その後は協力する。

リリィ白石（しらいし）

コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。噴嚏っ早く「小さい」と言われると切れてしまう。

加寿子（かずこ）

帝国を統べる皇帝。2Vの力を吸収し、初代魔王ゼロを支配下に置く。皇帝のみが使用できる3つの強力な魔術を操る。

けいす

ゼロと共に仮想空間内にいた小柄な少女。ゼロを封印する力を持つ唯一の存在。

Prologue

The red-haired girl did not know where she had been born.

Yet by the age of two or three, she already knew who she was.

"I am me."

In her understanding, that meant she was no one else but herself.

That may have been why that dangerous thing took a liking to her.

It came from somewhere, joined with a human, definitively changed that human, and took no responsibility for its actions. It had no form, was undetectable, and could not be proven to exist, but it had the same type of mind as a human. Or rather, it was nothing but that mind.

She met it before she turned four.

She had moved from a kind person's house, to an orphanage, and then to orphanage after orphanage. Amid it all, she had begun to speak with someone. She would speak into empty air and laugh at a response no one else could hear. Those around her noticed, but they thought she simply had an imaginary friend like many children her age did.

However, she truly was speaking with what appeared deep within her eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I am no one, but I will become you."

"Eh? But I'm me."

"That too is correct."

"Hm. Then will there be another one of me?"

"Yes. I will be with you."

"Really? Then I won't be lonely anymore!"

"Unfortunately, you will be alone."

"Why? You won't be my friend?"

"I will be you, so I will not be your friend. It is very sad, but you will always be alone. No one will understand you and you will go somewhere far away."

"I don't want that. I don't."

"It has already been decided. You are a special existence. You are more special than a four leafed clover or a male calico cat."

"I'm that special!? I never understood why I was alone, why I have to keep changing homes, why the adults bow down to me, and why it seems like they're making fun of me, but I guess it's because I'm special. …But I don't want to be alone."

"You will always be alone, but do not worry. You can make one friend. Whenever you have a problem, just cry. If you do, someone will come to save you."

"I just have to cry?"

"Yes. That is how the world works."

That conversation had been their first meeting.

Afterwards, the red-haired girl lived with, spoke with, and was guided by it. Her life of moving from orphanage to orphanage did not change, but she had few problems due to the guidance of the voice.

She eventually forgot about it as she grew up, but that could also mean it had truly become a part of her. Even so, she would sometimes be driven to action by its words. One such incident was when she saw a certain boy. He had a twisted look to his face and he had a mature atmosphere for his age, but the word "cry" appeared in her mind when she saw him.

She cried and cried and he gave her a hair decoration.

"Is that how it works?" wondered that red-haired girl named Soga Keena.

Why was she in this environment? Why was she being moved from orphanage to orphanage? Why was she special? Why had she been born? Her questions quickly caused her to freeze up.

She tried to tell the boy how she felt, but she could not form the words properly. As she hesitated, he spoke as if he understood why she was crying and he left.

Keena understood that had been a destined meeting.

But when she put on the hair decoration, she forgot all about it.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of the Final Battle

Sai Akuto looked down on the scene below as he floated in midair.

A great crowd surrounded the palace. As far as the eye could see, the ground and the sky were filled with people. Those were the people who had stood up to Zero's control via the L'Isle-Adams. Protesting with their pure hatred was fine, but the problem was their sudden support as soon as Empress Kazuko declared her own dictatorship.

—That left me with no choice.

Akuto had just announced he was the demon king. Doing so and defeating Zero and Kazuko was the only way to free the people. Zero had been awakened and used by 2V, but Kazuko was now the one controlling him. Zero had been used to fill the people with unease and Kazuko was taking advantage of that unease.

—I will use this power to its fullest.

By dying and resurrecting, he had gained his power as the demon king. It was a frightening fact and even he did not want to believe it was true, but he had been created as both a human and a weapon. He was created to retain the emotions and sense of self of a human while having unlimited control over the power of the gods known as magic. That meant he was perfectly sane. He fully understood how much power he had and what was possible for him, but he did not go mad with power or fear his power.

—If they were going to make me into a demon king, they should have given me the ability to truly go nuts with the villain act.

Akuto silently complained.

However, he had to keep up the act on the outside.

"This artificial creation that claims to be a demon king may have driven fear into the people, but I will show you that only one may hold that title!" he shouted.

He felt a painful wave of emotions swell up from below. The vast crowd turned all of their anger and fear toward him.

Akuto could feel it all because he could now view the logs saved within the gods. Those logs converted people's emotions into data and then into words. Akuto's brain was directly connected to the gods, so he could sense

how every individual had lived their life in the past. He could tell what each and every one of them had eaten for dinner three years ago.

—This power… It's like I can read their minds. I really can become a god or a demon king. And it's because I am a normal person like everyone else that I can become either one. All of the past demon kings must have stood in this same position and made some kind of decision. Just like me, they must have wanted to set the people free and they must have worked to sound like a demon king.

"Fill yourselves with rage and terror! Give me more and more! That is what powers me!"

He was making up demon king-like things to say, but even if they were lies, he could sense himself being tugged toward being a demon king as he spoke. If he was not careful, he could truly end up that way. He had to be doubly careful to remain sane.

—I need to stay calm. I need to analyze the information and think about what to do next.

The ability to know how other people lived gave him an unimaginable amount of information. He could read the past actions and emotions of every single person in the crowd, so he knew exactly how they felt about the current situation and what he had to do.

—They believe the empress is the only one who can save them from Zero's rule. And they think I am using the confusion to defeat both Zero and the empress.

It was true Zero had tried to take over mankind after awakening, but the one using the confusion to make a grab for power was Empress Kazuko. However, the people fully trusted Kazuko. She was the empress, she looked benevolent, and she used gentle actions.

Her title and appearance were enough for the people to trust her even though they actually knew next to nothing about her.

—I need to defeat Zero. The empress too. And I need to destroy this ridiculous story everyone believes in. I'll destroy the concept of the emperor and the demon king.

With his mind made up, he felt a sort of resolution.

And he saw a single person float up from the crowd below. He wore a special suit and was viewed as a hero by the people.

—If he defeats me in the end, the story everyone believes in will meet its demise. And once that happens…

In the past, Miwa Hiroshi had done nothing but hesitate, but Akuto sensed a definite resolution in him now. He was flying off to take Hattori Yuuko to safety, but he would return.

Either Lily Shiraishi's appeal to him had worked or Yuuko's actions had given him courage. Now that Akuto had awakened, he could sense the flow of emotions Hiroshi had experienced.

—After I am gone, I can leave everything to Hiroshi!

Akuto turned toward the palace terrace. A single L'Isle-Adam had appeared there.

It was a male L'Isle-Adam with a majestic build. That was the body given to the program known as Zero. He looked up at Akuto with emotionless eyes and expressed his thoughts.

<You too are nothing more than a combat machine. Why are you so intent on eliminating me?>

Zero's words sounded like a provocation, but that may have simply been Akuto's interpretation. It was possible Zero meant it as an honest question.

Akuto responded without speaking.

<It is true I am also an artificial being. But I have something fundamentally different from you. I have the sense of self of a living creature. I have a human heart. Your heart and your emotions are like pouring a different color water into a bucket of water. You are not independent individuals. However, I am me. In the same way, all humans are independent people. I cannot let you melt us all together.>

<It is because you are split into individuals that you cannot be controlled. My master feels the same way.>

<Your master? You mean Kazuko?> asked Akuto.

A bright voice joined in.

<Correct. I am sure you already know due to your power, but I have taken 2V's power.>

That voice had a ring to it that would put anyone at ease and make them smile. However, it sounded like the alluring voice of a succubus to Akuto. Just listening to her voice made him want to agree with everything she said.

<If you are controlling Zero, then I don't see why he needs to be defeated,> said Akuto cautiously.

Empress Kazuko remained hidden deep in the temple and spoke telepathically.

<That is true. Yes, very true.>

Kazuko agreed, but it did not mean she completely agreed with Akuto.

<So let me defeat you,> she continued in a grinning voice. <That should convince the people, don't you think?>

Akuto grimaced.

<And you'll rule over them all afterwards?>

<Yes. It is quite simple, isn't it? The situation has changed, but I will keep my promise. As long as you obey me, I will not kill you and I will guarantee you a comfortable life.>

She spoke as if the thought of someone disagreeing with her was unthinkable.

Akuto clicked his tongue.

<It's all about you, isn't it?>

But Kazuko showed no sign of caring. She tilted her head as if cutely making a request.

<Yes. This is a selfish demand, but will you please listen to me? Or did you only pretend to listen earlier? Were you planning to betray me after you defeated Zero? You should not play dirty like that. People will think you are a bad person.>

Kazuko smiled and Akuto replied with anger evident on his face.

<I don't care if they do. And if you already understand, there's no point in hiding it: I am opposed to what you're doing. You changed your mind and began to protect Zero because your rule will be more convenient with the gods around. If Zero is defeated, the gods will lose their very foundation.>

<Oh, what a smart boy. In that case, have you realized that what I want is not all that different from what you want? You want everyone to know who you truly are. It is the same for me,> said Kazuko with no hint of fearing Akuto.

Akuto knew what it felt like to want people to know who you truly were.

But his true essence was the polar opposite of hers.

<If your identity as empress is just an illusion and is nothing like your real self, then cast it aside and go live your real life!>

<That is not happening. I am a greedy person. I am by no means a human and kind empress, but being empress is convenient. Casting that aside would be a waste. I will use that identity. And haven't you used your identity as demon king for your own convenience?>

<Sorry, but I don't see it as convenient. I want this to be the last time I use my powers,> answered Akuto.

Kazuko's response did not arrive until after a short pause.

<I knew this would happen, but it seems our negotiations have failed.>

<We had no common ground to begin with.>

<In that case, every imperial citizen is your enemy. Now, let us begin. I am not interested in watching a farce, so please make it a grand performance.>

On Kazuko's signal, Zero jumped up from the palace terrace.

Akuto took a defensive stance, but Zero's jump took him away from Akuto. He stopped in midair a good distance away and ripped away the artificial skin on his arms to expose the internal machinery. Akuto watched on in confusion as countless L'Isle-Adams floated up from below and gathered around Zero. They gathered around his body by attaching to his exposed arms.

As if setting up building blocks, Zero created a giant body for himself.

"You've gotta be kidding me…"

Akuto grimaced.

What finally stood before him was a 15 meter giant with exposed machinery.

"What a pain. Do I really have to have a fistfight with this thing?" he complained.

"That combination into a giant form isn't meaningless. At first glance, it does look like the product of some silly belief that a steel giant is a symbol of power, though."

That comment came from Kita Yoshie. She had a habit of getting overly excited and she currently had her goggles lowered as she analyzed Zero's new form that had appeared in the palace yard.

"You mean there is a meaning to that?" asked Hattori Junko.

They had been flying above the crowd in a floating boat, but they had arrived at one of the palace's terraces after making their way over the wall.

"Even with the demon king or Zero, it all comes down to a struggle over the resource known as mana. And that struggle isn't fought in the real world. It's like running a program; their processing power decides who wins."

Yoshie turned back on the terrace as she explained.

"Does combining increase his processing power?"

"Yes. It lets him use parallel processing. Normally, Zero would be worse off because the demon king can use all of the resources, but this form might give him more processing power."

"Then, how does the demon king… How does Akuto get processing power?"

"He isn't a machine, so he uses his human brain. However, our magic system is created to react to human imagination and human emotions. Even if he's losing in the struggle over power, he should win when it comes to using magic. His passion will win in the end. Fwoh! This is so exciting!"

Junko glanced over at Yoshie, leaned out over the terrace, and looked down.

"The onlookers have run away."

Zero's transformation and the hint of an upcoming battle had caused the crowd near the palace to leave, so the only ones on the palace grounds were Junko, Yoshie, Keisu, and those inside the palace.

"What? You don't find this exciting? I guess I can see why. We came all this way, but the situation has changed and Keisu can't remember anything. It does feel like we've accomplished nothing."

Yoshie looked over at Keisu whose shoulders were drawn back.

Keisu was a short samurai-style girl with a ponytail. She was the only L'Isle-Adam not under Zero's control and she held the secret to sealing Zero, but she had done nothing but travel alongside them so far.

"I am truly ashamed that I cannot remember anything," apologized Keisu.

"No, it's fine. Just try to remember if it comes down to it."

Yoshie rubbed Keisu's head.

Keisu seemed to find it ticklish and she looked up at Yoshie.

"You sure are kind, boss."

"Boss?"

"I ask that you let me call you that. I offer you my life."

Yoshie gave a broad smile.

"Fine. As long as you feel this helps you in some way."

"It looks like we might have to protect Keisu first," said Junko nervously.

Yoshie turned toward the inside of the palace and her expression stiffened when she saw who was there.

Kazuko had appeared inside a palace corridor.

"That is Keisu, isn't it?"

Kazuko spoke kindly and walked elegantly toward them, but she was stained with blood.

"Your Majesty… That is… human blood…"

Junko had fought on a battlefield before, so she could distinguish between demonic beast blood and human blood by the smell. However, Kazuko showed no concern.

"Ho ho ho," she laughed quietly. "I was merely handling a bit of a complex domestic issue. I am embarrassed you had to see the evidence of the fight."

"…!"

Junko let out a wordless gasp. She felt instinctual fear toward Kazuko.

"Oh, my. Do not look at me like I am insane. At the very least, I am more confident than anyone else that I am sane."

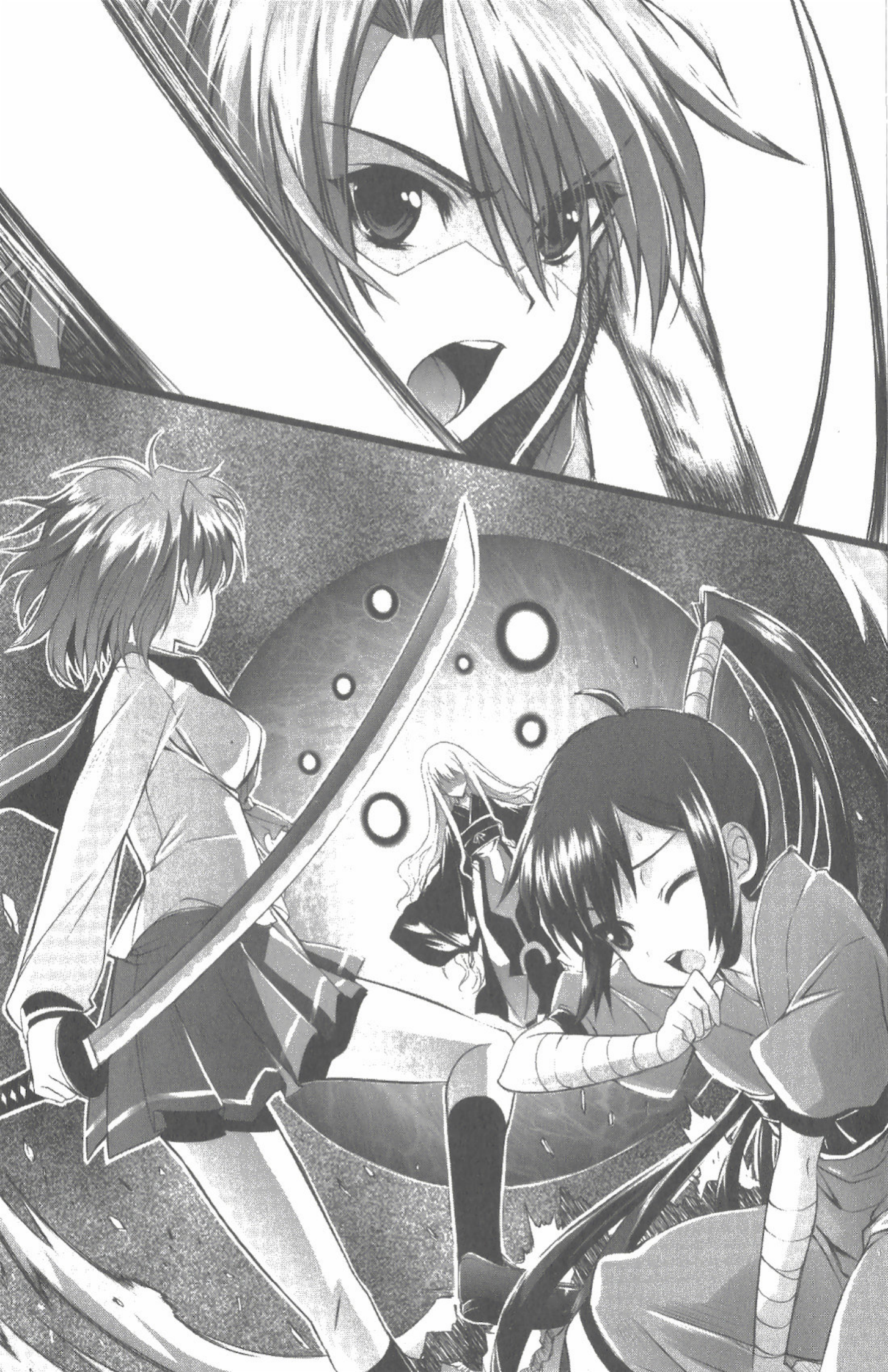
As Kazuko spoke, an abnormal aura rose from her body. It was different from a flash of mana. It was a collection of emotion similar to killer intent and it seemed to freeze Yoshie and Junko in place.

"She is…"

"Dangerous…"

The two girls began to sweat and they could not move properly.

In an instant, a voice seemed to wake them up.



"Let Keisu escape!"

The voice came from behind Kazuko and Junko recognized it.

"Keena?" she muttered.

That distraction allowed her to move once more.

And then a mana sphere shot toward them. When Junko blocked it with her sword, the mana sphere rotated around the sword as if stuck to it, but the instant it touched the blade, it split in two like a jelly confectionery.

"What?"

Junko was surprised to feel a bizarre sensation not present in normal mana spheres.

Kazuko had fired the mana sphere and it had flown directly toward Keisu.

Kazuko opened her eyes in interest.

"You cut the Yasakani no Magatama!? That sword was given to you by the gods, wasn't it?"

"It was…but what happened?"

Junko was confused. Some technique she was not aware of had been used.

That confusion made Kazuko grin.

"My attack could not have been destroyed otherwise, so I was just making sure."

She raised her hand to fire another mana sphere.

"Not good!"

Junko quickly turned toward Yoshie and Yoshie took action before Junko could warn her.

"Run, Keisu!"

Yoshie activated her chainsaw and climbed up onto the edge of the terrace.

"But I dislike fleeing," grumbled Keisu.

Yoshie decided to change her wording.

"I'm going to jump down, so protect me."

Yoshie then toppled off of the terrace and disappeared over the edge.

"Boss!"

Keisu leaned over the terrace.

She could see Yoshie falling.

"I am on my way!"

Keisu jumped down after her.

After seeing that, Junko held up her sword and prepared for Kazuko's mana sphere.

But the attack never came.

"You still have not given up?"

Kazuko had stopped moving and she was looking down. Someone's hand was wrapped around her leg. It was not simply grabbing the ankle. An entire forearm was stretched out like rubber and wrapped around the entire leg.

"As long as I don't think I've lost, I won't lose even if I die."

It was Lily Shiraishi. Her body was lying on the ground a few meters from Kazuko. She had clearly been struck many times because her clothes were torn to pieces. Her boyish face was horribly swollen, so she had obviously been punched quite fiercely. Even so, she stretched her arm out toward Kazuko.

"Yasakani no Magatama."

Without even turning around, Kazuko held her hand back and fired a mana sphere toward Lily.

"Tch!"

Lily returned her arm to normal and slowly stood up.

But it did not appear she could move faster than the mana sphere.

"Watch out!"

Junko ran past Kazuko and stood in front of Lily. She used her momentum to swing the sword and instantly cut down the mana sphere.

"President! What is going on?"

Junko had reacted as she saw fit, but she did not have a proper grasp on the situation.

"Well, you could sum it up by saying the empress was the mastermind," answered Lily with a sarcastic smile. "She took out 2V and is now trying to eliminate those of us who know the truth."

She said it so simply and Junko did not think she was lying.

Junko's expression stiffened and she turned toward Kazuko.

The empress laughed.

"Ho ho. You make me sound like a horrible person. Then again, you were telling the truth, so I suppose it can't be helped."

Junko frowned.

"I despise you, Your Majesty."

Kazuko laughed that off as well.

"Some thrones cannot be won without becoming despised. We cannot have peace otherwise."

"Are you saying the people want someone to sit on the throne?" asked Junko without thinking.

Kazuko nodded.

"Didn't you hear them cheering?"

"Kh."

Junko was unsure what to say.

"Give it up," cut in Lily as she stood up on unsteady feet. "She isn't going to listen. More importantly, what are you going to do if those that escaped tell the truth?"

Other than those present, Etou Fujiko and Soga Keena had both witnessed Kazuko killing 2V and they were nowhere to be seen.

"That's right. Where are Etou and Keena?" asked Junko.

Lily grinned.

"Keena quickly stripped off her clothes and Etou-kun ran off at the first opening while I fought."

"I see. So that's it."

Keena was able to turn invisible. She became undetectable even by those who could sense mana. However, she could not turn her clothes invisible as well, so she had to strip naked. That must have been why Junko had heard Keena's voice earlier.

Kazuko narrowed her eyes in suspicion while listening to the comment about Keena, but then she shook her head as if to clear those thoughts.

"Whatever they have done, I can find and silence those who have fled."

Kazuko held up a hand.

With the sound of mana, a sword of light appeared.

"Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi."

That was the name Kazuko gave to the two meter sword of light that appeared in midair.

It glowed as if a portion of the sun had fallen to the earth. Even at a distance, Junko could feel the heat radiating from it.

"Watch out. That's really powerful," warned Lily who had seen 2V pierced by one of those swords.

"Okay. I have the perfect defense."

Junko held her sword in front of her eyes and twisted it slightly to the left. This defensive stance let her immediately cut in any direction.

"That isn't what I meant! Its power is-…" cried Lily.

"It is too late." Kazuko narrowed her eyes. "I will pierce both of you at once."

Kazuko swung her hand and the sword of light flew toward Junko.

"Ee!"

The power of the sword could be heard in the roaring of the sliced air and the tremendous rumbling of mana. It was created from mana, so it should have had an upper limit to its power. However, the heat and waves emanating from the sword were much more intense than anything Junko had seen before.

"I can't stop this!"

Junko was unable to move her sword. If she had tried to block it, the sword's blade would likely have been cut in two. It would have then stabbed through Junko and Lily behind her.

But with a roar, Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi passed by Junko to the left.

The sword stabbed through the palace wall behind them and the heat melted the area around the hole. Most frightening of all, it had produced almost no noise even as it had stabbed into the wall. That meant it had melted the wall with almost no resistance.

"She missed…"

Junko took a breath.

Junko knew better than anyone that she had not evaded the attack. The path of the sword had been off from the beginning.

This was due to Kazuko's stance having crumbled. In the instant she fired the sword, something must have struck her because she was down on her right knee.

Junko spotted a shining hair decoration floating behind Kazuko.

"Thanks," said Junko quietly.

That hair decoration belonged to Keena. The girl must have tackled Kazuko just before she fired the sword.

Lily also breathed a sigh of relief, but she shook her head because she could not let her guard down.

"She missed, but it won't happen again. She seems to like tormenting others, but she started using that sword once you showed you could cut her mana spheres."

Kazuko stood back up and shook her head. It seemed she had realized what Keena's power was.

"So one of you can turn invisible. But that is only a small problem as long as you have no real means of attack. I will not miss this time."

Kazuko swept her hands around her to make sure Keena was not nearby.

"What was that sword or those spheres?" asked Junko as she turned toward Lily.

"Techniques only those of the imperial bloodline can use. With 2V's ability to control L'Isle-Adams, there seem to be three in all."

"Only those of the imperial bloodline?"

"Using them is the proof that you are part of the bloodline. Their use is a symbol of authority."

"So that is why those attacks are so powerful."

Junko understood Lily's explanation, but that meant the next attack would finish them off.

"You run away. I'll hold her here as long as I can," said Lily.

Her expression did not look remotely tragic. It was as if this were only natural.

Junko shook her head.

"I cannot run off after you say that. And I have made up my mind as well. I left his side based on my own feelings once. As long as he is risking his own life here, I cannot leave. I do not want to regret my actions like that again."

Junko's expression did not waver. Now that she understood what was happening, she knew exactly what Akuto was trying to do. He was literally betting his very existence on defeating Kazuko and Zero.

It seemed Junko's expression was enough to tell Lily who "he" was. Lily grinned and lowered the brim of her battered hat to look away from Junko.

"How old-fashioned. Well, I won't say anything tasteless, but it's meaningless if you don't win. I hope you're ready to be known as the killer of your empress," said Lily.

Junko nodded firmly.

Kazuko laughed as she listened in.

"The killer of your empress? I have a hard time knowing how to respond to something as ridiculous as that," she said calmly.

She raised a hand, compressed some mana, and produced another sword of light.

Junko's legs froze in place when faced with that overwhelming presence, but she had to think up a way to fight now that she had made up her mind.

"I'll disturb her with movement!"

Still holding her sword up, Junko seemed to slide forward and then she leaped to the side.

Kazuko moved her head. From her point of view, Junko had to have simply vanished.

She finally caught sight of Junko, but Junko leaped in the opposite direction.

But even though she could be seen jumping to the side, she was also still standing in that spot. Two Junkos now existed. This was the duplication technique she excelled at. She created other one of herself out of mana and this duplicate really was physically there.

"Iga Ninja Art – Scattered Moonlight!"

In the end, there were five versions of Junko and they all leaped around Kazuko as if trying to confuse her.

Kazuko was unable to focus on any one point.

The five Junkos used that as their opportunity to attack.

"Yaaaaah!"

All of the duplicates had physical forms thanks to the mana, so they were not simply illusions. That meant they could all attack. The five of them attacked with slightly shifted timing to prevent Kazuko from evading.

But…

"You created duplicates from mana? That method is useless against someone with precise control over mana," said Kazuko calmly.

She lightly waved a hand.

"Wha-…!?"

The Junkos were dumbfounded.

The Junko in front of Kazuko's hand had vanished. She moved her hand further and more and more of the Junkos disappeared.

"Tch!"

But Junko did not let up. Once the four duplicates were gone, the real Junko swept her sword horizontally and tried to cut at Kazuko's side.

"Ohhhhhh!" she cried out.

But her shout was cut short. She suddenly stopped the swinging of her sword.

Kazuko was directly facing Junko and the tip of the glowing sword in her hand was pressed up against Junko's throat.

"This is how you fight with magic."

"What? Impossible…"

"No, this is was inevitable. At least be glad you were killed by someone greater than the gods," said Kazuko with a grin.

Kazuko suddenly lurched to the side. It seemed Keena had tackled her again while invisible. But that was all that happened. Kazuko had been wary of Keena and Keena was not all that powerful. With a look of annoyance, Kazuko swung a hand through empty space. Junko heard an impact and a scream.

All the while, the tip of Kazuko's sword of light did not move from Junko's throat.

"There is nothing left to interfere."

"Ee…"

Junko's eyes opened wide in fear.

Kazuko gathered strength in her arm to stab Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi.

And…

The entire temple grew dark as if the power had gone out.

Kazuko's hand stopped. Junko doubted she was the type to lose her cool just because it was a bit dark. Plus, it was still daytime, so the light coming in from outside was enough to see with.

"W-was I saved?" muttered Junko as she leaped backwards.

Kazuko's sword was losing its physical form.

"The mana in this space is reducing."

Kazuko pointed her palm upwards, used magic, and saw that it only caused a slight change.

"Is the mana in the atmosphere being reduced?"

While wiping away her cold sweat, Junko checked her sense of the surrounding mana.

"The energy supply is being reduced at the same time," added Lily.

Junko was regaining her calm. She realized that, given the situation, it was entirely possible she could successfully fight back against the empress.

"This lowers my physical strength too, but I have a chance if neither of us can use magic!"

Junko charged toward Kazuko again.

Kazuko evaded with a back step.

"Zero is absorbing the mana and energy. No… The demon king can probably do that too."

Kazuko looked out the window.

"Boss, that was not fair. You could get down on your own."

"Of course I could. I'm not going to do anything stupid."

Yoshie had stabbed her running chainsaw into the wall which had slowed her fall and allowed her to land safely on the ground.

Keisu had jumped after her, passed by her midway, and landed first. Yoshie had been forced to dig her out where she had sunken halfway into the soft ground.

The two of them were watching Akuto and Zero's battle while making sure no one had followed them from the palace.

After transforming into a giant humanoid machine, Zero filled half of their vision as they looked up.

Akuto looked like a toy doll compared to Zero.

However, they felt equally powerful to Yoshie.

"How strange. Their sizes are so different, but they give off a similar aura," she commented.

"But the flow of mana is different. Look."

Keisu pointed toward Zero.

Zero's long arms spread to the left and right. The sound of his arms slicing through the wind rang out and the compressed atmosphere burst outward, but that was not all.

"Mana? …Oh!"

Yoshie lowered her goggles and checked her surroundings. The goggles visualized the flow of mana.

The colored mana spread through the air like clouds. And if those had been real clouds, it would have meant a typhoon had descended low in the sky. Mana was being sucked into a whirlwind around Zero.

"Fwohhh! That's one hell of a cyclone," muttered Yoshie.

The rotating mana produced an air current that blew Yoshie and Keisu's hair about. As the surrounding mana was stolen, a physical storm appeared. Starting at the palace, buildings began to go dark in an

expanding circle. All mana-powered devices became unusable and the people could not use magic.

"This looks like a scene from the apocalypse. A dark giant devours all and battles an angel that cast himself out of heaven. A modern day Armageddon is playing out before our eyes. We have to watch this. This could be the beginning of a true hell."

Yoshie grinned as the storm raged.

—So he combined to absorb mana.

Akuto grasped Zero's intention. By breaking down and recombining countless L'Isle-Adams, he had taken in a large amount of mana and gained the processing power needed to control it. However, he could not use complex techniques like a human. He could only use brute force.

And that was what he used. His fist let out a groan as it flew toward Akuto. The fist was wrapped in a storm of mana.

—I can't do anything if that hits me.

Akuto controlled the flow of mana around him. He could not defeat Zero in the physical struggle between mana or the struggle over gathering an energy supply of mana. That meant he had to fight by minutely controlling the mana and turning aside his enemy's power.

Kakei. Constant Magic Academy's headmaster had taught him that fighting style and this would be similar to using it on a larger scale.

The coming attack was like a small crashing airplane and Akuto evaded it at the last moment. He controlled the turbulent flow of mana and altered the direction of that giant power with the smallest necessary amount of his own power.

<You cannot resist forever. I am absorbing the surrounding mana and there is a limit to how much you can use. There is no need to prolong this.>

Zero's comment was surprisingly considerate.

<Why are you saying that?>

<My objective is to control mankind. I have no need to eliminate you if you do not force my hand.>

<You mean you aren't completely controlled by the empress?> asked Akuto.

The empress was definitely trying to kill him, but Zero said he was not.

<My top priority is protecting mankind,> answered Zero.

<So you obey her as long as her orders don't conflict with that protection,> realized Akuto.

<Precisely. I wish for as efficient a conclusion as possible. Without wasting energy, I wish to reduce mankind's numbers to the point that they will not destroy themselves.>

The two of them held a strange conversation as they fought. But it was the fight that brought them close enough to confirm each other's goals just between the two of them.

Akuto understood now.

<In that case, we are destined to fight, aren't we?>

<This is nothing more than consuming energy. It is impossible for you to eliminate me.>

Zero too seemed to have come to an understanding. He swung his giant fist once more.

<I wouldn't be so sure.>

Akuto moved toward the giant fist that passed by his side, placed a hand on one of the giant fingers, and focused mana in his hand.

"Hahh!" shouted Akuto.

The smallest of Zero's fingers burst at the second joint that Akuto pressed his hand against. The finger broke apart as it fell to the ground.

Zero drew back his fist and moved away from Akuto.

<You used my mana.>

Zero analyzed the situation as he observed the exposed machinery of the finger. Akuto had taken the mana stored in Zero's body and transformed it into explosive power.

<This way, I don't need all that much mana for myself. I can make up for our difference in size,> explained Akuto.

However, this method required great concentration. This mana was being controlled by Zero. To take that control away and place it under his own control, Akuto had to accurately focus on moving each piece of mana. He had his abilities as the demon king, but this was an issue of pure mental focus.

Zero of course understood what Akuto was doing.

<You will reach the limit of your non-mechanical body.>

Zero swung his giant fist toward Akuto again.

—Kh!

Akuto deflected it and flew back to escape.

He waited for an opening at a distance.

Zero's fists used a combination attack that did not befit his giant form.

Mana was meant to be used by a human body. That meant mana was most efficiently used by someone with two arms and two legs like a human. Even if he was a machine, Zero's fighting style resembled martial arts and he did a splendid job of making efficient attacks using his two arms.

He swung his long arms and legs and the hands and feet at the end easily broke the sound barrier. His fists compressed the air and a conical cloud of steam exploded out around the fists to add power to the attacks.

But the timing and openings of his attacks were essentially the same as in martial arts.

—In that case, I have no choice but to answer in kind!

"Ohhhhh!" roared Akuto.

He clenched his fist and shot forward.

His opponent was ten times his height, so the difference was greater than that between and adult and a child.

Even so, he succeeded in starting a fistfight.

It was a stationary fistfight. They both stopped still in midair and fiercely swung their arms and legs at each other.

Zero sent surefire strikes toward the center of Akuto's body.

Akuto used repeated attacks that slowly but surely tore away Zero's body.

There was an overwhelming size difference between the fists and their fighting styles were completely different, but it was still a fistfight.

Zero predicted Akuto's actions and tried to punch at the central axis of his body.

Akuto deflected the fists, turned them aside, and punched at their sides with his own fist. The action was similar to repeatedly passing a thread through the eye of a needle at high speed.

Zero's processing power clashed with Akuto's mental strength. This was a competition to see which one would win out.

Zero attacked once for every few of Akuto's attacks, but he accurately targeted Akuto, forcing Akuto to use mana to defend in all directions. This gradually wore down Akuto's focus.

Meanwhile, each of Akutos' attacks tore at Zero's fists little by little.

Would Akuto's mental strength run out first or would Zero's body crumble first?

The metal and plastic of Zero's parts and the glow of mana scattered from where Zero and Akuto's fists clashed. That showed how they were both being worn down mentally and physically.

Hiroshi returned to the sky above the palace and felt a chill run down his spine when he saw Zero and Akuto's fistfight.

—Is he planning to die?

In everyday life, a thought like that may not have been too serious, but it was frightening when viewing a fight like this.

—I noticed him looking at me. But…

Hiroshi's body stiffened with a feeling similar to fear.

—He really is planning to leave everything to me!

Hiroshi understood that. Akuto had once tried to destroy the system of the gods. His intentions were unlikely to have changed. That meant Akuto wished to destroy Zero. However, he did not want to bring chaos to the world. His goal was to eliminate the existence known as the demon king. His goal would not be achieved unless he and Zero destroyed each other.

Hiroshi had fallen partially into a daze, but he came to his senses when he heard voices down below.

He could not make out the words, but they were clearly cheering him on. They were cheering for Brave. He looked down and saw the people watching the battle from a distance. They had noticed his presence.

—There's something I have to do.

He knew he could not expect the people to bring this situation under control. He was still a hero.

He looked up into the sky where the two demon kings were literally tearing away at each other as they fought. Akuto seemed to have noticed Hiroshi's return and he gave a single glance toward Hiroshi.

—I understand… In fact, I already did.

Akuto's glance told Hiroshi everything.

"Boss, the battle is coming to an end."

"So it's almost over."

Keisu and Yoshie whispered to each other as the fistfight clearly approached its conclusion.

Zero had lost a large portion of his body and Akuto had received a fair bit of damage from the blows his mana had failed to defend against.

"I think the next strike might decide it," said Yoshie.

She then looked to the side because she heard someone stepping on the grass.

"It can't be…" she said in surprise.

Kazuko was walking over to them and she was dragging someone behind her with her right hand. She was displaying unbelievable strength for her slender frame.

But even more surprising was whose limp form it was Kazuko was dragging.

"Hattori Junko... Don't tell me you…killed her…"

Yoshie could barely force out the words, but Kazuko gently shook her head.

"Without mana, I can only strike her directly. It takes quite a lot to kill a human."

Kazuko then let go of Junko's arms. Junko collapsed limply to the grass and let out a quiet groan.

"She's still alive."

Yoshie was relieved, but the situation was not headed in a good direction. Yoshie stepped back so as to stand protectively in front of Keisu.

Kazuko smiled.

"So I decided to wait until later to kill her. I will focus on Keisu first. I must see this L'Isle-Adam who can seal Zero."

Kazuko took a slow step forward.

Yoshie flinched back, but Keisu pushed her aside and stepped forward.

"I will handle this."

"No, wait."

Yoshie was conflicted.

It seemed Keisu was able to function normally without mana, so she could easily handle a normal human. However, Kazuko had the strength needed to drag Junko with only one arm. Kazuko had to have been artificially altered just like Akuto. In that case, the outcome of a fight was unclear. And Yoshie could not allow Keisu to fight unless victory was assured.

—I'll have to find a way to do it myself.

Yoshie made up her mind and began to step forward. However, the chainsaw felt quite heavy in the current situation.

"Ho ho. How very reckless of you."

Kazuko laughed and took another step forward.

She did not seem concerned at all. In fact, she looked away from Yoshie and up into the sky.

"Oh, my. The situation is changing by the second. And it seems this will end in an unexpected fashion."

Yoshie also glanced up at Akuto and Zero's battle.

The two of them were continuing to fight while completely battered.

However, that was not what Kazuko had been commenting on. A single line of light shot in from the edge of Yoshie's vision.

It shot straight up toward the battle.

"What is that?" asked Yoshie.

"Brave, the demonic beast slayer. In other words, that is the enemy of those with the name 'demon king'," explained Kazuko calmly.

"You don't mean he's planning to take out both of them, do you?"

Yoshie's eyes widened in surprise.

Brave shot straight toward where Zero and Akuto were fighting.

Yoshie pulled down her goggles and had them display a magnified image of Brave.

She saw Brave equip his cape. High-temperature plasma balls then appeared around him. This was Brave's most powerful attack.

Her goggles analyzed the image and concluded the attack did not use mana. They also told her a mana canceller was in effect around Brave, so mana was unusable within a few meters of him.

"Does that mean there's no way to defend against this attack!?" cried Yoshie.

At this rate, Zero and Akuto would both be destroyed.

"If Zero and the demon king are eliminated, I will need to think up a new plan. After all, losing Zero will make the gods unusable," said Kazuko.

"But…!"

Yoshie tried to argue, but she could not form the words.

Akuto was risking his life to destroy Zero instead of sealing him. Hiroshi understood that, but that did not guarantee he would not carry out Akuto's wishes by eliminating both of them.

"Ahh…" groaned Yoshie.

While surrounded by the plasma balls, Brave shot through Zero's back and into Akuto.

Brave had become an orange glowing line of heat that sliced apart that scene of intense fighting.

Zero and Akuto had already worn each other down and they now seemed to freeze in place like a still image, but Zero exploded a moment later. The explosion enveloped them both and they disappeared into the sea of orange light.

It looked like a small sun had appeared in the sky.

Yoshie was wearing her goggles, but it was so bright that even she had to look away.

After the ball of flames finally faded away, giant pieces of wreckage and a single charred body fell from the sky. Brave then slowly descended into the palace yard.

"Ah… Ah…"

Yoshie was completely dumbfounded.

The giant pieces of wreckage clearly came from Zero, but that meant the charred body was…

"Well done."

Kazuko spread her arms in welcome as Brave descended.

He landed before her and she nodded.

"I must thank you for defeating the demon king. You must be the mysterious hero that has been talked about recently."

"Yes, that seems to be what people are calling me," said Brave Hiroshi calmly.

"Then can I assume you were fighting for the empire's sake and for my sake?" asked Kazuko probingly.

One side of Brave's mouth rose in a smile. Only his mouth was left exposed by his mask, but that was enough to show off this daring expression.

"No. I wasn't fighting for this empire or for you individually. I just feel the need to do something when people are crying."

Kazuko's expression twitched slightly.

This was the first imperfection in her always calm expression.

"Who are you? And why are you wearing such a dangerous suit?"

"I'm sure you've figured out who I am underneath this mask. But while I wear this suit, I go by the name Brave. That is all I am. And I have two goals: justice and peace."

"Ho…ho ho." Kazuko laughed at Brave's answer. "Ho ho ho ho ho! That is most amusing. How can someone who used to be nothing but a cowardly student act so full of himself when all he has is borrowed power!?"

"That isn't quite accurate. There's no such thing as power you take for yourself. Most of the time, you're either born with it or someone casually gives it to you. Either way, you never asked for it. The proper way to live your life is to behave in a way befitting of that power even if you have to force yourself."

There was no hint of hesitation in Brave's voice.

"Are you saying you do not intend to obey me even though you killed the demon king?" asked Kazuko with a slight tremor to her voice.

"No, that isn't it."

Brave shook his head.

"Then what-…?"

"You will obey me," he said. "You will give us back the lives we had before."

"What?"

Kazuko was speechless.

"Zero has been destroyed, so return society to the way it was. That is all I have to say," added Brave.

All expression vanished from Kazuko's face, but a charming smile appeared an instant later.

"Oh ho ho ho ho ho! You are the first person to ever speak to me like that! But aren't you overlooking something? The mana has yet to vanish! That means the gods are still functioning."

Kazuko produced a glowing sword in her hand.

"What are you doing?" asked Brave just as she swung the sword.

The tip stopped just in front of Junko's throat as she lay groaning at Kazuko's feet.

"This girl is still valuable as a hostage, if nothing else. Isn't that right?"

"Is this all you have, Your Majesty!?"

Brave swung his hand. He must have activated his mana canceller because Kazuko's glowing sword vanished.

"No. I have much more than that."

Kazuko picked Junko up, took a small jump backwards, and turned a cold smile in Brave's direction.

"I think you are the one that is out of tricks. You fell for the same trap twice."

A virtual alternate dimension field suddenly appeared, surrounding Brave from a distance. That field cut off that space, so Brave's suit was unable to transfer in energy from another dimension. This was the strategy 2V had developed based on her knowledge of the suit, but Kazuko should not have known about it.

"Wait… Did you obtain 2V's memories too?" asked Yoshie who had seen the related series of events.

"Precisely." Kazuko then turned toward Brave. "Your energy will not last long now."

But Brave kept his head firmly raised.

"Either way, I just needed to know what your true intentions were. I'm not as stupid as you think."

"What? There is nothing left you can do. Your mana canceller is no longer in effect."

Kazuko produced another Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi in her hand.

"But now that you are not a threat, it is no longer necessary for me to kill you. Accept your position. The people have high expectations of you. You can show off your justice under my rule."

"And if I refuse, you'll kill Hattori Junko?" asked Brave threateningly.

"Who can say? It is all up to you now," said Kazuko cutely.

But Brave boldly puffed out his chest.

"I thought I told you I'm not as stupid as you think."

He raised his hand.

Kazuko took a defensive stance, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Heh. What do you think you are doing?"

"I will enforce my own brand of justice. As long as they aren't evil, I have no problem with demon kings," said Brave with a grin.

"You don't mean…!?"

Kazuko leaped away.

An instant later, a dark shadow swiftly cut through the space she had been standing in.

"You tricked me!"

Kazuko's expression had clearly changed now.

The dark shadow smoothly scooped up Junko and rose to its feet.

"He didn't actually trick you. He really did char my body," complained Akuto.

He looked like a dark shadow because the surface of his body had been carbonized. The black surface peeled away and smooth skin finally appeared beneath.

"This is the last time you make a fool of me," said Kazuko in a low voice.

In the exact opposite of before, this new voice struck fear in the heart of anyone who heard it.

However, the same shining smile remained on her face. In fact, it may have been even brighter than before.

"I will slaughter all of you," she announced as she waved her hand.

The entire atmosphere around Kazuko seemed to tremble.

Yoshie gasped as she sensed the change.

"This is a mana burst!" she shouted.

This technique sent the mana out of control until the mana itself exploded and came apart. This was not used in magic. It only ever happened by accident. The explosion it created would destroy any material related to mana.

"This will destroy her along with everyone else here!"

"Has she gone insane!?"

Akuto and Brave both shouted out, but Kazuko only sneered.

"No. Zero can perform a magical transfer at the last second. I alone will survive! Demon king, you can likely survive as well, but your human brain does not possess the processing power needed to transfer everyone here."

"Are you making him choose who to save!?" shouted Yoshie as she moved in to protect Keisu.

But Keisu did not react to Yoshie's action. She stood perfectly still.

"…?"

Yoshie looked down at Keisu and found that the look in the L'Isle-Adam's eyes had completely changed. Keisu then spoke smoothly in a completely different tone of voice from before.

"Zero is entering his second stage. He is leaving his fixed body and switching to network infiltration mode. Please immediately transport me to Zero's true body."

"Wh-what are you talking about? Did you remember what you have to do?"

When Yoshie spoke to Keisu, Keisu returned to normal and nodded toward Yoshie.

"I remember now. Zero is-…"

But Kazuko cut her off.

"You may remember, but it is too late."

The empress smiled.

The earth began to sink down as if tremendous pressure were pressing down on it. In a circle a few meters across, the ground remained around Kazuko, but everything outside began to collapse and fall down. And then the scope of the damage began to accelerate outwards.

"Begone," declared Kazuko coldly.

In that instant, the area filled with light.

From the sky, one would have seen a sphere of light a kilometer across appear at the palace. It reached several hundred meters into the sky and was visible from a great distance.

The light did not remain for long, but no survivors remained once it vanished. Nothing but a giant crater could be seen.

Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Moon

When Junko came to, she realized her injuries were healed and she stared at her own hand.

She seemed to be up in the sky. She looked down at the surface far, far below. She saw the city and the crater torn from it.

She could tell she was not ascending into heaven because she felt warmth in her body. She looked up and saw Akuto right there.

"Ee!" she shrieked without thinking.

When Akuto noticed she was awake, he nodded and spoke worriedly.

"Oh, you've come to. Are you okay?"

"Y-yes…"

She looked away in embarrassment and went over the situation in her head, but then she recalled Kazuko and Akuto's conversation before she had lost consciousness.

"Y-you did not choose me as the one person you saved, did you?"

A frightening thought entered her mind. Kazuko had predicted Akuto would only be able to transfer a few people. And that meant…

"Well…"

Akuto gave an embarrassed smile.

—Do not tell me you really did!

For an instant, Junko trembled in joy. She had never thought he would choose her from among all those people. But her delight was immediately followed by fear of all of the people who had died and of her own self-righteousness.

"D-do not tell me you really did only save me," she said in a trembling voice.

"No, I transferred everyone else too," said Akuto with the embarrassed smile still on his face.

"Everyone else?"

"Everyone in the range of the blast," he said casually.

"You transferred all of them?"

Junko's voice cracked a bit and he nodded.

"I tried it and it worked. I grasped everyone's position, searched for a safe place for all of them, and transferred them."

Surprisingly, not a single person had died in the giant explosion in the center of the imperial capital. The explosion had covered an area a kilometer wide and it had left behind nothing but a giant crater, but no one had died.

There had of course been a large number of people around the palace where the explosion had occurred. All of those people only remembered seeing the scenery before their eyes change. A moment later, they had seen the explosion in the distance. After thinking for a second, they had realized someone had transferred them to safety.

But they had no way of knowing who had done so or how.

"Is that even possible?"

Junko could not believe it.

There had been tens of thousands of people there. It was beyond amazing that he could have grasped each and every person's location. And to then transfer them all would have required truly unbelievable mental strength. It was similar to grasping the location of each and every grain in a box full of sand and then moving them elsewhere one at a time.

Kazuko had caused the mana burst because she had believed it was impossible for him to do so. She had assumed Akuto could only transfer a few people.

"Well, I managed it. I transferred the others not far from here, but I took you with me because you were unconscious. I went ahead and healed your injuries."

Akuto made it all sound perfectly normal.

"S-so that is what happened."

Junko was relieved, but she also felt a bit disappointed.

"Anyway, let's head down to the surface where I transferred the others," he said before beginning to descend.

He moved horribly slowly and Junko grew incredibly embarrassed over how he was holding her against his body. She may have felt a bit guilty about her previous thoughts.

"U-understood. B-by the way, could you let me go? I can use flight magic," suggested Junko.

But Akuto shook his head.

"Sorry, but could you put up with this for now? If you move away from me, you won't have enough oxygen. I'm gathering oxygen and heat around me. Also, the mana isn't dense enough here to use normal flight magic."

He sounded unsure what else to say.

"We are that high up? But then shouldn't we descend more quickly? You could do it in an instant, right?"

Junko squirmed as she spoke.

"The thing is, I wanted to have a private chat with you."

"Eh?"

Junko looked up at him in surprise. He averted his gaze awkwardly and actually looked like a teenage boy for once.

"Wh-wh-wh-why are you acting so differently all of a sudden?"

His strange behavior left Junko feeling flustered.

He then began speaking in a slow apologetic voice.

"I can fully use the power of the gods now, so I can view the records of other people's lives."

"Eh? Wait a minute. Are you saying you saw the records of how I have lived?"

She started to panic.

He nodded awkwardly.

"Sorry. I wanted to apologize in private."

"Y-you idiot! That is like peeking!"

"Th-that's why I'm apologizing. But I only saw what was related to me, so…"

"That is bad enough! D-d-do you mean you know what I have done while you were not around?"

Junko blushed and shook her head back and forth.

"Yes. …I'm not sure what to say."

"Waaaah! Stop! And does that mean you know how I feel?"

"Yes, it does," answered Akuto with a small nod.

Junko let out a high-pitched shriek and covered her face with her hands, but Akuto remained silent. She had either resigned herself to what was to

come or she was completely desperate because she spoke up in a trembling voice.

"Then… Will you accept me?"

"Of course," he said with a perfectly serious expression.

"Eh…? Eh…?"

Junko spread her arms and looked up at Akuto with a look of disbelief. Tears formed in her eyes and her lips trembled in joy.

"Th-then you…you…"

She wrapped her arms around Akuto.

"Don't worry. I will protect you. I know you rebelled against the empire because you sympathized with my ideals," decisively stated Akuto.

Junko realized this was heading in an odd direction, so she loosened her arms.

"W-wait. I sympathized with your ideals?"

"Eh? Didn't you? You were cautious of Yoshie-san, but once you met her and spoke with her, your mental state changed. You gained the will to fight."

"A-about that…"

Junko trailed off.

That was due to what Akuto had said about Yoshie and Junko getting along. Yoshie was a girl, but Junko had first met her in the virtual alternate dimension where she went by the name Yoshihiko and looked like a guy. Junko had thought Akuto was saying she should get to know "Yoshihiko" as a boy.

That had nothing to do with his ideals. Junko could only assume Akuto understood nothing about what she had been thinking.

And Akuto confirmed her suspicions with his next decisive statement.

"You spoke with Yoshie-san, heard what I planned to do, and agreed with me. That is why I fought here in order to live up to your expectations."

"You said you saw what I did, but was that all you saw? You didn't see what I do in bed each night or what I mutter to myself when no one else is around?" asked Junko quickly with a complicated expression.

Akuto looked confused.

"No. I didn't look at anything private. That would be rude."

"Ha…ha…ha ha… Right. Of course you wouldn't."

Junko laughed while half in a daze.

"By the way, were you worried I would see something strange?"

"No, no, no! Of course not! I do not do anything like that! N-now, we need to hurry to the others. I get how determined you are."

Junko then exhaustedly looked up into the heavens.

"Are you okay? Are you in pain or are you cold?" asked Akuto when he noticed.

"I am fine. But let me hit you."

Junko then swung her fists down on Akuto's head again and again.

"Ow, that hurts. My body may be sturdy, but I still feel pain," complained Akuto.

"I do not care! Just let me hit you for a bit!" shouted Junko angrily as her fists gradually gathered more and more strength.

"If he managed that transfer, it means the empress was wrong about his power," said Yoshie as she stared at the distance crater in admiration.

"Did A-chan really do that?" asked Keena.

She was wearing her clothes now. Her removed clothes had been transferred along with her.

They stood on the roof of a building from which the remains of the palace were visible. Yoshie, Keena, Keisu, and Hiroshi had been transferred there. Hiroshi had been transferred along with the rest after his suit had run out of energy.

"He's the only one who could have. It's hard to believe it was possible even for him, but I know he would try to save everyone."

Hiroshi sounded somehow embarrassed as he spoke.

"Saving everyone there makes him sound like a god. But that's exactly why no one will think the demon king did it," said Yoshie as she looked down at the ground.

The roads were filled with the people who had been gathered at the palace. Yoshie could not hear what the people were saying, but they likely believed Kazuko had saved them.

"This was pretty much a miracle, so you can't really blame them."

Hiroshi did not bother disguising his voice around his group.

"As impressive as that was, we have some questions we need to ask."

Yoshie suddenly turned toward Keisu.

Keisu nodded with a serious expression she had never shown before. Her tone of voice was also more business-like.

"My memories have returned and it was likely due to Zero's awakening. My brain seems to be linked to him."

"So that's how it works. And what do you mean when you say he awakened?"

"It is called his second stage. He has no central object he controls and instead becomes almost entirely fused with the gods."

"What do you mean?"

"The Zero we have seen so far is nothing but a terminal. By abandoning that terminal, his core can begin making its way into the gods' network."

"We heard Zero acts as the core that makes the gods the gods, so are you saying that core is taking over the gods like a computer virus?"

"That sums it up well enough."

"How do we seal him? If that's what his second stage is, is there an anti-virus program we inject into the network?"

"No. Zero's true form – that is to say, his sense of self – is fixed in the location of his birth. I must suppress that sense of self. That is how he is sealed," explained Keisu.

"His sense of self?" asked Yoshie while tilting her head.

"Think of it as what makes you aware of your identity as yourself and what is located at the center of your thoughts. The gods and L'Isle-Adams do not inherently have a sense of self. Zero is the only artificial intelligence that has one and his sense of self is what supports the gods' autonomous thoughts. I must suppress that sense of self. However, that sense of self is a black box, so direct physical contact with Zero's true body is needed." Keisu pointed at herself. "I must touch him and suppress his sense of self. I will link with the body surrounding Zero's black box. You could say I am a component of Zero, so I have the ability to essentially put his sense of self to sleep."

"I see," said Yoshie with a nod. "So we need to go where Zero was born. Where is that?"

Keisu moved the finger she had used to point at herself. For some reason, she held it straight up.

"Up? Is something coming?"

"I don't see anything."

Keena and Yoshie were confused because they could only see the bluish-white moon visible in the daytime sky.

A sudden thought came to Yoshie.

"You don't mean…"

Keisu nodded.

"The moon. We must go to the moon."

"Well, that's a problem. These days, nothing but satellites are sent into space." Yoshie was surprised and she spread her arms. "I think we just have to give up."

"I heard in history class that there used to be a research city on the moon," said Keena.

She had always been good in her normal studies.

"It was abandoned after it produced no real results and it was forgotten once we developed our magic society. No one even thought about heading into outer space because it isn't compatible with our magic society," said Yoshie to double check what she knew about that research city.

"That is incorrect." Keisu shook her head. "Despite what your history classes may have taught you, the moon city was abandoned in order to seal Zero. He was also the control program for the moon city, so it cannot function without activating him. There was no option but to abandon the moon."

Yoshie was shocked to hear that. It made sense since Zero's creation had been related to the dawning of magic society, but this was much too different from what she had learned.

"I can't believe it… But wait. If we need to go to the moon to seal Zero, how was it possible to break that seal from earth?"

"Because Zero acted as the base of the gods' system as he slept, I was able to maintain a link to him even here on earth. I was modified to act as a safety valve. Because the workings of Zero's black box are unknown, they wanted to be able to regulate him via me."

"Then there must have been a research institution behind it. I worked in a temple, but I've never heard any rumors about that. It would have to be the black magicians or CIMO 8." Yoshie suddenly felt as if several events were pointing toward a single point. "All of the mysteries up until now are forming a strange sign. Why did space travel become taboo? Why did the empress herself allow the black magicians to survive? Why did the original demon king war happen?"

Yoshie seriously yet interestedly spoke her thoughts.

"Maybe we should think about this later," cut in Hiroshi. "Don't we need to figure out how to get to the moon?"

Yoshie turned to Keisu.

"Given what you said, there has to be an easy way to get to the moon."

Keisu nodded.

"Yes. There is a transfer circle leading there."

Hiroshi clapped his hands together.

"Oh, I get it. They left a way back in case they needed to reseal him. So where is it?"

"Below Constant Magic Academy."

"I see. The first war must have been fought over access to that circle," muttered Yoshie in admiration.

Keisu continued speaking without giving a direct response.

"But Zero knows where the transfer circle is, too. Now that he has further fused with the gods, he will have become a more accurate combat machine and he will try to destroy me. He can use every single system which is based on mana to destroy the demon king and me. That includes everything down to the traffic lights and air purifiers."

Keisu's statement was frightening.

"That doesn't sound good. I guess that means we shouldn't stay in the city too long. Zero can't detect your location, can he?" asked Yoshie.

Keisu nodded.

"That is correct. I predict he will use L'Isle-Adams to attack anyone who tries to approach the magic circle."

"This is getting closer to all-out war. Then again, he makes up all of society now, so I guess we'd be the villains. And instead of all-out war, this is just us rebelling against society. The scale of the conflict is a bit big for that, though."

Yoshie gave a bitter smile.

"I feel bad about getting all of you involved in this," responded a sudden voice.

Akuto was descending from the sky while holding Junko.

"A-chan! Junko-chan!" cried Keena as she ran over to them.

Hiroshi also looked up at Akuto, smiled, and began to run over to him, but he stopped as soon as he saw Akuto's face.

He of course still wanted to approach his friend.

However, he was reminded of the look he had seen on Akuto's face when he had shot down Akuto for his act earlier.

Hiroshi had intended to make it an act from the beginning. He had believed that was what Akuto wanted, but just before the plasma had burst to fry only Akuto's outer layer, Akuto had not been smiling. His expression had been one of quiet resolution.

—That was the look of someone who did not care if I killed him.

He had known Akuto had that side to him. He had seen that same expression the last time they had directly clashed. But last time it had come from a belief that being killed was better than committing suicide or from a belief that Hiroshi could not kill him. In other words, it had been a fearless and confident expression.

But the meaning was completely different this time.

—He planned to leave everything to me afterwards.

Akuto had tried to leave it to Hiroshi to settle things after his death. It sounded good if one said Akuto fully trusted Hiroshi, but it felt heavier than that to Hiroshi. Essentially, Akuto wanted him to decisively stand on the side of "justice".

No matter what happened in this battle, Akuto planned to end it with his own destruction. But he could not allow justice to be destroyed or to lose. Even if it was weakened or powerless, justice had to continue fighting with pride. He would never see peace.

But for the moment, Hiroshi suppressed the discomfort in his heart and walked over to Akuto.

"Did you hear all that? I can't believe we have to find a transfer circle leading to the moon."

"I heard, but I will not ask the rest of you to fight alongside me," said Akuto.

Hiroshi felt a prickling in his heart. Those words were not directed toward him. This proved Akuto recognized his power, but it still weighed heavily on him.

Even so, Hiroshi held his hand out toward Akuto for a handshake.

"Now that we know the truth, we can't just back out."

"Thanks."

Akuto accepted the handshake.

Hiroshi understood why the warmth and strength of that handshake added to the weight in his heart.

Akuto viewed him as an equal.

—He's overestimating me. I'm not that strong. I can't do anything without the suit.

Hiroshi changed the subject so as not to be distracted by his thoughts.

"If we're going to do this, shouldn't we take a look at the overall situation first? Can you pull up a screen showing the area around the school?"

"Sure."

Akuto nodded and opened a mana screen. It displayed Constant Magic Academy from the side.

Yoshie looked impressed.

"With Zero in control, it's hard for us to use magic, but you can do anything. But what's all this? It looks like they gathered as many of their forces as they could."

L'Isle-Adam soldiers covered the academy's grounds. Those grounds were large, but there were thousands of L'Isle-Adams and hundreds of combat vehicles.

"They couldn't deploy the army around the palace because of all the innocent people there, but it looks like the academy is different. Defending the magic circle is their main goal, so we should probably count ourselves lucky they didn't send out a battleship."

"But with this much firepower gathered, only aniki and I can fight," said Hiroshi.

"The two of us will have to take Keisu then," said Akuto with a nod.

Keena had remained silent for a while, but she finally spoke up.

"You can't do that, A-chan."

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous."

Everyone was surprised to hear Keena state the obvious. As he stared blankly at her, Hiroshi was both confused and impressed.

—She can honestly say whatever she's thinking.

And that had a way of drawing out Akuto's honest side.

"Well, I know it's dangerous, but…"

"I know what you want to do, A-chan. And I feel like it's something you have to do, but still."

Keena looked up at Akuto with teary eyes.

"I know I can't keep escaping death like this, but I know I was born to bring this all to an end. I have no other choice."

Akuto had a peculiar look in his eyes as if he had lost interest in everything and resigned himself to his fate.

But Keena puffed out her cheeks.

"C'mon! If you say that again, I'll get mad!"

"I think you're already mad. And I understand why you are. You were put in danger too and you saw that tremendous explosion."

"That's not it!"

Keena was clearly angry now.

Hiroshi understood how she felt. In fact, he felt pathetic because Keena was saying what he had been unable to say himself.

—I hope nothing horrible happens.

Just as Hiroshi thought that, Akuto suddenly looked behind him.

"What is that!?"

An odd distortion in space had appeared on one corner of the rooftop. It resembled the visual sign of something being transferred via mana, but it was clearly different. The others did not seem to understand, but Hiroshi immediately recognized that distortion.

"That isn't mana."

His eyes widened in surprise. This was identical to the distortions in space when he called in his suit.

He had only ever seen one person use those distortions other than the Brave suit.

"Yamato… Bouichirou…" muttered Akuto.

That man had once tried to use Keena in a strange ritual sacrifice to the gods. He had claimed to come from the future where he had seen mankind's destruction.

The man who had just arrived via a transfer using technology impossible to recreate with modern science was slender and wore a lab coat. He did not seem full of himself, but he was indeed good looking. He adjusted the position of his glasses and began speaking with no introduction.

"I have a plan and I will have you carry it out."

Hiroshi took a defensive stance toward this strange man.

—This man uses the same powers as Yamato Bouichirou.

"What do you mean a plan? Who are you?" called Hiroshi while hiding the tension in his voice.

The man shook his head as if to say "oops".

"Oh, that's right. I have a bad habit of stating my business before introducing myself. My name is Kurahashi Kento. I am a member of CIMO 8, but I believe I can earn a certain sort of trust from you."

This man named Kento was the last CIMO 8 member to speak with 2V.

"CIMO 8? That was Yamato Bouichirou's organization," muttered Hiroshi.

However, none of the other members had used the same power as the Brave suit. It was possible this man knew more than the others.

"Wait," said Yoshie suddenly. "Are you Codename USD?"

Kento nodded.

"That is what I am called within CIMO 8."

"Kita-san, do you know him?" asked Junko.

"He graduated from Constant Magic Academy with the highest grades in the school's history," said Yoshie in an oddly excited tone. "He won the Alpha Award which is the highest honor one can achieve in magical research and he is well-respected in other fields ranging from mathematics to art. In short, he's a genius. At some point he half-retired from his job as priest and the rumor among the priests was that he became a member of CIMO 8. Other than Yamato Bouichirou, the group's leader, he's the only member of CIMO 8 whose real name is known. Basically, he was too skilled for his name to remain hidden. From what I had heard, his codename is USD. He's known as history's strongest."

That profile was exactly the sort of thing Yoshie would love.

Kento adjusted his glasses as if to say this was a troublesome group he had gotten involved with, but he did not correct anything she said.

"That transfer didn't use magic. If anyone uses magic, I can detect it," said Akuto. "But if you learned that from Yamato Bouichirou, it makes sense."

Kento nodded.

"Yes. This is the 'certain sort of trust' I mentioned."

That comment meant the most to Hiroshi.

Yamato Bouichirou had been the one to give him the Brave suit.

"Trust? But all we know is your identity. Which side are you on? Are you our enemy or our ally?" strongly asked Hiroshi.

"I would say I am on neither side. At least, I am not on the empress's side or on your side. However, I must cooperate with you for the time being. I want you to seal Zero," kindly explained Kento.

"What are you after?" asked Hiroshi because he could not figure it out.

"I cannot say at the moment. But you…"

Kento pointed at Hiroshi.

Hiroshi gave a start.

"What?"

"You have no choice but to do what I say. You are using the suit we gave you."

Kento's words seemed to stab into Hiroshi's heart.

"What…?"

Akuto then cut in.

" 'We'? Do you mean Yamato Bouichirou is with you?"

Kento shook his head.

"I do not know where he is. I assume he is dead, but I have no real confirmation."

"Then have you inherited his technology?" asked Akuto.

"Completely," said Kento with a nod. "It is still being argued whether history can be altered or not, but I am sure to go down in history as the inventor of this technology." Kento turned a slight smile toward Hiroshi. "Simply put, I am lending that suit to you. It is set so only you can use it, but I can freely take it from you."

Hiroshi was unable to hide how much this bothered him.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked in a trembling voice.

Kento's smile grew.

"You can view it that way if you wish, but I am merely making a request. I have nothing to offer you in return, but if you aren't going to fight, why do you need the suit? Or do you plan to become a vigilante?"

Kento was not trying to provoke Hiroshi. His was completely serious. And that made his words hit Hiroshi all the harder.

He knew he was only borrowing the power of the suit, but he felt it all the more when the person who gave him that power stood before him. In fact, he felt it was possible he would become a slave to that person.

But he also knew he could not choose to give up the suit. He needed to fight alongside Akuto.

"I will fight only when I believe I should fight. That is all I will say," stated Hiroshi in a pained voice.

Kento laughed.

"Yes. That is what you call a vigilante."

Hiroshi could say nothing in response.

Akuto must not have liked Kento's attitude because he spoke in a low voice.

"Then why won't you help us directly?"

"I am an onlooker," replied Kento. "That is what I must be."

"Can you really remain an onlooker in this situation?" asked Akuto half in disbelief.

Kento nodded.

"If you look at this incident from a higher level, there is nothing I can do but watch on."

"From a higher level? Enough nonsense. Just tell us what you know."

Akuto did not even bother trying to hide his displeasure.

"Fine."

Kento began explaining his surprising plan. Hiroshi would play the central role.

Hiroshi listened while groaning internally.

Meanwhile, Etou Fujiko was elsewhere.

She was in a park on the outskirts of the city. She could see others who had been transferred there. They were clearly shocked by the miracle that had occurred and they spoke with each other.

Fujiko spoke to a nearby middle-aged woman. Fujiko looked like a nice person on the outside, so it was not hard to get the woman to speak. She learned the woman fully believed the empress had caused the miracle.

—I see. How foolish of her.

Fujiko kept her surprise to herself and pretended to agree with the woman. She praised the empress, cursed the demon king for causing the Mana Burst, spoke a word of parting, and left.

She of course did not mean the curses, but she decided cursing Akuto might be a good idea after all once she walked through the park a bit and realized she was the only one of their group who had been sent there.

"Ahh… Honestly, Akuto-sama. Why must you treat me this way just because I ran off on my own?"

As she complained, she suddenly spotted someone she recognized out of the corner of her eye.

Her mouth opened in surprise and she muttered under her breath.

"Oh, my! What a coincidence! No, this might have been Akuto-sama's intention. How clever of him!"

It did not seem like a coincidence. Akuto had to have transferred her near this person. Fujiko took back the curses yet again and began pursuing this person from a distance.

The person seemed to be worried about drawing attention to himself. He was walking from empty area to empty area and he was currently headed deeper into the park where the trees grew thick. These were the distinctive actions of someone up to no good.

"Oh, my. How convenient."

Fujiko laughed quietly. She followed the man while making sure he did not spot her when he occasionally checked behind him.

The distinctive man with messy hair was Suzuki Issei.

He was the leader of the black magicians, but that position had been given to him by the empress in secret. His duty was to keep their secrets and hide the true form of the black magicians.

For an ardent black magician like Fujiko, that was more than enough reason to hold a grudge against him. He had deceived everyone for a long, long time and he had stood in the way of progress for the black magicians.

—I will make the most of the opportunity Akuto-sama gave me.

Fujiko quietly laughed again. Once she saw Issei lean up against a tree and sit down in a deserted area, she slowly snuck up behind that tree and wrapped her whip around his neck from behind.

She carried out the action without making any noise and did not give Issei enough time to shout out. He jumped in shock and then brought his hands to his throat when he had difficulty breathing.

"Is it a coincidence I found you here?" Fujiko tightened the whip from behind the tree and peered at his head from behind. "Or was this planned? Either way, I do not want you doing anything suspicious. Or rather, if you are going to do something suspicious, you need the guts to boldly do so in front of everyone."

Her voice seemed to clue Issei in to who was strangling him.

"S-stop… I saw what Kazuko did… I didn't realize she was that crazy… Please forgive me…"

Issei did his best to speak, but Fujiko spoke in a truly cruel tone of voice.

"Forgive you? I would say what you did deserves my hatred, not my forgiveness."

"I-I know that… I will tell you what secrets I know… So let's work together…"

"Work together?"

Fujiko tightened her grip on the whip.

"C-cough… Okay… We won't work together… I'll obey you…"

"You do not seem to understand my personality very well, but I suppose someone who only just met me might need some help. I am greedy," she said teasingly while beginning to regulate the strength of the whip.

"O-okay. I'll give you the rights to the inheritance of black magic… Surely that's enough…"

Fujiko grinned at that condition.

"That will do. But I am not letting my guard down. I will let you live, but we can talk here and now."

Fujiko loosened her grip a bit, but she was skilled enough to not quite let him breathe easily.

"Who would have thought my experience killing in the virtual alternate dimension would come in handy here?" she said dangerously.

"Kh… Cough… Here, I'll give you the password to transfer to the secret room from that store. I simply memorized the keyword, so I'll write it in my memo pad."

Issei reached into his pocket with a trembling hand, pulled out a standard mana memo pad, and wrote something in it. He hid the page with his hands, so Fujiko could not see what he was writing.

"I wrote it…in here…"

Issei then threw the memo pad into the distance. Fujiko would have to let go of the whip to reach it.

She understood why he had done that.

"You think you are quite clever, don't you?"

"Heh heh," laughed Issei weakly but with a hint of relief. "I'm glad you're so greedy. I don't care about my job as a grave keeper, but I need to stay alive if I'm going to keep eating more bowls of ramen. I think I wrote the real password, but it's possible I made a mistake."

"Hmph. I suppose you have managed to keep your life for now."

Fujiko loosened the whip, jumped away from him with the tree between them, and circled around the tree from a distance.

However, he had already run off.

She saw his receding back, knew she could not catch up, and walked over to pick up the memo pad.

It contained a string of characters. It contained too little regularity for something he made up on the spot, so she assumed it was real. She would not know for sure until she tried it, though.

"I do not want him to think he tricked me. I must revive true black magic, but something must be done about Kazuko and Zero before that can happen."

Fujiko checked through the memo pad. It did not seem to have any other important information, but it did have Issei's contact information. She could directly contact him telepathically and she could use that to determine his location.

—He was probably lying when he said he would help me defeat Kazuko, but he might actually have information on her.

Fujiko had no intention of defeating Kazuko if it meant putting herself in danger, but she wanted to help Akuto if she could.

"Perhaps I can sell this information to the student council president. She must be desperate to get back at Kazuko, so she might end up torturing Issei. This could be interesting to watch."

Fujiko was satisfied with how evil the idea was. She memorized the password and erased it from the memo pad. If it was real, she would be able to revive true black magic.

Chapter 3: Even if I Say Goodbye

By nightfall, Akuto's group had moved to an abandoned building outside the city. It had originally been a factory, but it was now a dreary space with a roof covering the bare ground.

Yoshie had remembered it as a place they could hide, so Akuto had transferred them all there. Zero was monitoring the flow of mana over the entire empire, so only three people could escape his notice: Akuto who wielded the same power, Brave who had a mana canceller, and Keisu.

Akuto was currently spreading out a camping set he had brought from somewhere and everyone was sitting around the light of a lamp as they pleased. This hideout would likely keep them safe for the time being. Hiroshi had been checking his map, but now he asked Akuto's permission to head outside and take a look around. After that, they all received a rare time of rest.

"I love abandoned buildings. I always want to take photos. There's so much romance in forgotten places. You can imagine a cornered soldier died here or something."

Yoshie alone was excited, but she was also the only one working while she spoke on and on. She was creating the equipment they would need for their plan.

"It's been a while since I constructed something, but it really brings out my craft-loving side. I just wish this job wasn't so easy."

She was currently fixing a rundown land vehicle. They had brought in an abandoned vehicle and she was making sure it would run.

"Are you good at all kinds of construction?" asked Akuto with an impressed tone.

"When I create my programs, I also want to make the mana devices to run them on. And when I create devices, I want to create the programs to run on them," answered Yoshie proudly.

Akuto could feel his heart calming down as he watched her. This was the first time he had spoken to her in a relaxed situation, but her oddly frank way of speaking allowed him to relax and simply be himself.

"How complex of things can you make?"

"I can go pretty far. For example, I can build autonomously thinking devices similar to L'Isle-Adams and the terminals of the gods. I can't create an actual consciousness like Zero, though."

This caught Akuto's interest.

"A human consciousness and a L'Isle-Adam's consciousness are different, right?"

"That's right. One has a sense of self and the other doesn't. It's kind of hard to explain. Even if you make a machine that can replicate itself, it won't have a sense of self. If an AI maintains a relationship with a person for long enough, they gain something resembling a sense of self, but it's still different from the sense of self humans have from the beginning. You could say this is one of the big mysteries of life."

"A mystery of life?" muttered Akuto.

"Yeah. What creates life? If we knew that, we might also learn the secret of the universe's origin. At the very least, I bet it's related to the end of the world that Yamato Bouichirou mentioned."

"I have a feeling someone closer by knows that secret but isn't aware of it."

Akuto glanced over at Keena's face as she slept leaning up against him.

As she breathed gently, she looked like nothing more than a normal girl, but he had seen her carry out miracles a few times in the past. Yamato Bouichirou had also been obsessed with her, so it was possible Kento was after her as well.

"Kento wants to seal Zero rather than destroy him, right?" asked Akuto.

"Of course he does. Destroy Zero and the gods would cease to exist. You might want to destroy them, though," said Yoshie with a laugh.

"Yeah, I definitely want to destroy them."

For a while, Junko had seemed to want to say something and she finally made up her mind.

"Why do you insist on going that far?"

"Eh?" asked Akuto in confusion.

"I still do not understand why you would do that. In fact, I do not understand you as a person."

Junko's tone was very earnest, so Akuto grew serious as well.

"I don't understand myself either and that is what I want to see. I want to know who I am. Someone created me and gave me a role, so my identity was set for me. If I do not bring that to an end, I can truly never be myself."

Akuto's answer was sincere, but Junko fidgeted in irritation.

"That is not what I mean. I…"

But she trailed off. She tried to find the right words but found herself unable to continue.

In her place, Keena spoke up.

"A-chan, you need to think about us too."

She had woken and was looking up at his face while still leaning up against him.

"I need to think about you?" he asked.

"That's right." She nodded. "Junko-chan is asking this because she likes you."

"Wha-… What are you…?"

Junko blushed and began shaking her hands in denial, but Akuto only nodded earnestly.

"And I like all of you. So…"

"Not like that. You're as important to us as rice is to a farmer!" forcefully declared Keena.

"What kind of analogy is that?"

"Eh? No analogy could make it clearer! Farmers treat their rice with care. Just because the rice will be sold and eaten in the end doesn't mean they forget about it or give up on it! And if the rice could speak, the farmers wouldn't want to talk about harvest time. They'd want to hear how much the rice loves them."

Keena continued on and on.

Despite Akuto's confused look, she seemed to be satisfied with the point she had made because she curled up and went back to sleep.

"Th-that girl says some strange things," said Junko with a bitter smile.

She was still blushing, but she seemed to think Akuto had not caught on.

Meanwhile, Akuto gave a contemplative look and finally spoke to Junko.

"Is it wrong of me to think about your happiness in the future even if I'm going to sacrifice myself?"

Junko was caught off guard by the sudden question, but she nodded as soon as she grasped what he had meant.

"Yes, it is. Of course it is. Just think about it. You are doing all this because you do not want horrible things to happen to others. Well, we are the same. Just as you do not want anything painful to happen to the people you…um…care for, we do not want anything painful to happen to-…" Junko trailed off shook her head and added, "Forget it."

But Akuto must have understood because he stared straight at her.

"I will try not to forget there are people willing to rescue me. Even if I was created as a tool meant to fight and ultimately die, I want to respond to your feelings up until the final moment."

"Wait, you idiot. Why are you getting so serious?"

Junko smiled to hide her embarrassment, but Akuto remained serious.

"Do not worry. I will bring everything to an end the day after tomorrow. Everything will go well."

"S-sure…"

Junko looked Akuto in the eye and gulped.

She then slowly reached her hand out toward his hand.

"Right. You want to bring it to an end."

Yoshie had appeared behind Akuto at some point and she suddenly embraced both him and Junko from behind.

"Hyah!"

"Ah…"

Junko and Akuto cried out.

"Sorry to interrupt you at such a nice moment, but I'll be upset if you don't let me join in," said Yoshie jokingly.

She rubbed her cheek up against Junko's cheek and tugged on Akuto's ear.

"When you're done, how about you pay this unsociable girl some attention? Or should the three of us do it together?"

"I-idiot… What are you saying…?"

Even Junko's ears turned red, but Yoshie ignored her and suddenly switched to a serious tone as she spoke to Akuto.

"Are you really planning to defeat Zero instead of sealing him? If so, you need to prepare yourself for that now."

"Yes." Akuto nodded. "I know what you're trying to say."

Akuto and Yoshie seemed to come to an understanding simply by exchanging a glance.

"And you're still going to do this? Are you sure that previous conversation isn't going to make your resolve waver?"

Akuto hesitated when he was asked again.

"You're right. I probably will hesitate. My thoughts are beginning to change a little."

Yoshie nodded and smiled.

"Then maybe I should put some effort into saving you as well."

"Wait. What are you two talking about?" asked Junko.

Yoshie returned to her teasing voice.

"Heh heh heh. Akuto-kun and I can understand each other pretty well without saying a word. Jealous?"

"Wh-why would I be jealous?"

Junko blushed yet again and waved her hands around.

"Ah ha ha. I'm just kidding. But it's because I'm so much like Akuto-kun that I like you so much."

Yoshie suddenly pushed Junko to the ground and climbed on top of her.

"Hyah! Stop!"

"Ohh, this sensation has a completely different charm to it than Fujiko-kun's."

Yoshie began groping various parts of Junko's body.

"S-stop that… Do not touch me there…"

"Touch you where? You'll have to tell me. And remember: Akuto-kun's listening."

"Wah! You idiot! You know what I mean, so just stop it!"

"Then should I say it?"

"Stop!"

"Tell me when you're done," said Akuto as he averted his gaze.

"You idiot! Stop her!" protested Junko.

Morning arrived.

This was the day on which Akuto intended to reach the transfer circle to the moon.

"If it gets dangerous, please get out of here," instructed Akuto.

He was speaking to the others aboard the land vehicle. That was Yoshie, Junko, Keena, and Keisu. Yoshie was the one driving the vehicle.

"I intend to, but I'm hoping we will all play a useful role here. Looking at that up there is enough to make me want to run away right now, though."

Yoshie felt a sudden chill.

The vehicle was on its way to Constant Magic Academy and L'Isle-Adams were waiting for them in formation. Having only four people charging

toward an entire army felt like running out into sub-zero temperatures while naked.

"That formation is meant to be used against magic. They thin out the mana along their enemy's expected route and fire real bullets accelerated with mana from the side. Normally, you wouldn't drive a vehicle up to an army waiting with a trench built," said Yoshie while analyzing the situation with her goggles.

The western side of the academy contained a vast area of land made up of hills both small and large. It was perfect for a battlefield.

"They have a virtual alternate dimension field in place. As expected, they're keeping Brave from acting here. We were right not to bring him."

"But our strategy is the same as we discussed. Instead of breaking through, I'll knock all the L'Isle-Adams out of commission," said Akuto casually.

"Wow. How reliable," joked Yoshie to hide her fear.

Yoshie's lighthearted personality and curiosity allowed her to manage in dangerous places, but she was acting different this time because she had no experience in actual combat.

And Akuto seemed to sense her unease. He placed a hand on her shoulder and nodded toward Junko.

"Just leave it to Junko."

Junko was not used to being referred to by her given name, so she let out a short cry of surprise. However, she quickly recovered and nodded.

"Do not worry. In a fight on this level, I can protect the vehicle."

Akuto smiled and nodded.

"Good. I trust you. I'll regulate the mana density along our path. Normally, I want the rest of you to only move once everything is safe. Even so, I'm sure Zero will target Keisu, so I want you to move the vehicle around as bait."

"Understood."

Yoshie smiled bitterly as if her fear had vanished.

"Okay. Let's get going."

Akuto waved a hand and ran forward so casually one would never think he was on his way to a battlefield.

Even so, the area ahead of them filled with violence the instant he began moving. They could hear explosions and see flashes of light and flames from well ahead of the land vehicle. They of course came from attacks being sent toward Akuto.

"I know he can handle attacks like that, but I am still worried," muttered Junko.

"Oh, such love. But try worrying about us right now! Toh!"

The vehicle jerked forward as Yoshie accelerated.

It was true they had no reason to worry about Akuto. Even though all the attacks were focused on him, he easily defended against them all. He even had the leeway to attack the L'Isle-Adam soldiers beginning to target the vehicle.

Even so, some soldiers slipped through. Yoshie could see them approaching from the distant group fighting with Akuto. Zero supposedly had no way of detecting Keisu, but the L'Isle-Adams had likely seen her. And even if they had not, it was only natural to attack the approaching vehicle.

Three groups of five L'Isle-Adams in military uniforms flew toward them. Akuto finally noticed the threat and fired mana spheres at them and managed to instantly blow away two of the groups, but the remaining five soldiers created a formation blocking the vehicle's path forward. The well-trained soldiers quickly aimed their rifles with efficient motions.

"Toh!"

Yoshie began turning the steering wheel, but Junko stopped her.

"Exposing our flank is more dangerous. Keep straight. The mana is dense enough for me to defend against this!"

Junko jumped up from her seat and landed in front of the advancing vehicle. She ran faster than the vehicle, lowered her hips, drew her sword, and created four copies of herself.

The five version of herself each charged toward one of the L'Isle-Adams.

They caught on to what she was doing, so they fired.

"Those guns are nothing!"

All five Junkos created mana barriers. Due to the scattered mana density, a few bullets pierced the barrier, but she rotated her sword quickly enough to cut through the bullets. The copies did the same and their mana-made swords sliced through the bullets just as easily.

"Hah!"

Junko sliced through the L'Isle-Adam and its gun with a single slice.

The copies did the exact same, so the five L'Isle-Adams were defeated simultaneously.

The land vehicle came to a stop next to her a moment later.

"Not bad," said Yoshie in admiration.

"More are coming," said Junko without growing embarrassed.

Just as she had said, more L'Isle-Adams that Akuto had missed were headed their way. This was not due to Akuto doing a poor job. The L'Isle-Adams – and therefore Zero – had made Keisu their main target. An overwhelming number of soldiers were targeting the vehicle.

"Drive around to avoid them as best as you can. Let's go."

Junko then created many more copies of herself. They surrounded the vehicle and defended against the coming enemies so that not even a single kitten could get through.

The wave of L'Isle-Adams struck the wall of Junkos and intense mana light surged out.

"Ee!"

Yoshie instinctually lowered her head, but not even a single bullet struck the vehicle.

The Junkos wielded their swords like fierce gods and sliced through, crushed, or repelled the L'Isle-Adams attacking with all sorts of weapons.

"Ohhhhhhhhh!" roared Junko.

It was commonly known that the effects of mana changed depending on one's imagination. Just as in Akuto and Zero's fight, a human will was the key to defeating L'Isle-Adams in a magic battle. This made Junko's honed mind overwhelming.

"Let's go!"

As Junko and her copies stopped the waves of L'Isle-Adams, she began to advance.

Junko and her copies moved in such harmony it was impossible to tell which was the original. They moved like a herd of wild bulls. The L'Isle-Adams outnumbered the Junkos, but their army began to crumble.

Once the L'Isle-Adams began to fall back, Junko pursued them.

Some of the retreating soldiers managed to recover well, but they only found the brutal destruction of Akuto's attacks awaiting them.

Every single L'Isle-Adam that entered his field of vision was diligently crushed. The ones nearby exploded from within after a single glare. The ones more distant had a mana sphere thrown through their gut with a single motion of a fingertip.

The L'Isle-Adams were under Zero's control, so the entire group was able to act like a living being, but Akuto was methodically crushing each individual cell. They could not maintain their ability to fight. If they had had a sense of self, the fear would likely have left them standing still like empty, soulless shells.

"I'm glad they're on our side."

Yoshie watched Junko and Akuto fight like it was a show.

"But they do look somehow beautiful like this," she muttered.

As Akuto remained motionless in the air while heartlessly and overwhelmingly crushing his enemies whether they were nearby or far away, he had the majesty one would expect of a demon king.

As Junko wielded her white sword so it danced like icy snow and cut open a path alongside her identical copies, she looked like the kind of fierce and beautiful swordsman who would accompany a demon king.

"Won't this be over before long?" asked Keena from the backseat where she was protecting Keisu.

"Looks that way," agreed Yoshie.

Barely any of the L'Isle-Adams were functioning anymore. Constant Magic Academy's grounds were covered in corpses.

"I feel sorry for them," muttered Keena.

"Yeah, I do feel sorry for those L'Isle-Adams," replied Yoshie. "He's managed to grow this heartless, but the worst part is yet to come."

"The worst part?" asked Keena in puzzlement.

"That's right. They've finished up outside, so now we have to enter the school building."

Yoshie pointed forward.

Akuto and Junko stood next to each other atop a pile of destroyed L'Isle-Adams. It was a desolate yet oddly reassuring sight.

Akuto and the others cautiously entered the school building.

When they peered inside, the halls were not filled with waiting L'Isle-Adams and nothing happened even when Akuto entered ahead of the others. No traps were waiting for them.

"What is going on?" asked Junko.

She was keeping an eye on their surroundings from the tail end of the group while they made their way to the stairs leading underground.

"Focusing your forces is standard. It's possible they didn't expect the army outside to actually win," answered Yoshie ahead of Junko.

She had input the route Keisu had mentioned into her goggles and now overlaid it on her surroundings.

"Okay, it's this way. Through this wall."

Yoshie pointed at a stone wall in an underground passageway that Akuto and the others from the school were familiar with.

"We've used this passageway before, but there was never anything-…"

Akuto trailed off as Yoshie checked her goggles again and placed a hand on one part the wall. With a low-pitched noise, the wall slid aside, revealing another passageway.

"I never knew this was here."

Surprised, Akuto checked within the passageway. There was no one inside, but the disturbance to the thick dust made it clear someone had passed through recently.

They continued through that passageway while protecting Keisu. They reached a staircase which brought them down several more floors.

When they arrived at the bottom, they saw a light at the end of the passageway.

Akuto stopped at the head of the group.

"Is that…?" asked Yoshie as she looked ahead. She then let out a groan. "I knew it… I had hoped I was wrong, but it looks like this really was their trump card."

"Y-you mention this trump card yesterday too, but what is it?"

Junko sounded confused as she peered forward from behind Keena and Keisu.

And then she gasped.

The silhouette of a slender girl was visible up ahead.

As they continued down the passageway, they found a room the size of a football field and a several meter wide transfer circle glowed in the center. The circle was the sole light source and the girl stood in front of it.

"I cannot let you go any further. I will kill you all here," she said in a cold voice.

Junko knew the voice well.

"Korone…"

As Junko continued forward, Korone's form came into view.

She realized this was what Akuto and Yoshie had been talking about. It was true Akuto would be unable to defeat her.

Korone wore her usual school uniform and the lack of expression in her eyes was the same as always, but her actions were completely different. As she raised her hand, the motion contained both Kazuko's grace and the mannerisms of Zero when he used a humanoid body.

"She's being controlled," muttered Junko.

"Most likely. But it's hard to say how direct the control is," said Yoshie cautiously.

"Korone!" called Akuto.

"That is this unit's name," replied Korone. "But at the moment…"

Korone raised her hand and the flow of mana around her distorted.

With the sound of the air ripping apart, a large transfer circle appeared over her head.

"A weapon?" muttered Akuto.

A large machine appeared from the circle. It looked halfway between a machine tool and an airplane and it seemed able to fly on its own.

Once it was fully transferred in, it slowly descended above Korone. Surprisingly, it began transforming. The center of the machine tool-like device split apart and a few of the pieces attached to different parts of Korone's body.

Once the transformation and combination completed, it looked like Korone was wearing some sort of armor. Alternatively, it looked like a giant twice the size of a normal human was holding a normal sized human in its belly.

Korone waved her hand to test the armor's movement. The double-sized hand let out a roar as it moved with great power. The hand pointed at Akuto.

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"I have equipped the Evil Bane Hammer, the artifact of the god Markt. You may call me Armored Korone."

"That strange joke sounds like Korone…" commented Junko.

"But she still has the mannerisms of Kazuko and Zero. She's being controlled, so this isn't really Korone. The different identities seem to be mixed together to a certain extent," added Akuto.

"So that's the Evil Bane Hammer. That powerful armor is kept by the Temple of Markt," explained Yoshie.

"So is it like my Sword of Sohaya?" asked Junko.

Each of the temples had a single weapon looked after by the priests. The devices created a stronger link to the god, so they were the most powerful weapons an individual could use. But during the recent peace, they had only been used as symbols.

"It is known as a hammer because it gives the wearer the hardness of steel and a powerful hammer with which to strike those who break the law. This weapon has been used in previous wars," explained Yoshie as she pointed at Korone's right arm.

A giant metal stake was attached to the forearm. The hammer was bent and it was large enough to overbalance the entire armor if held out straight. Its mere presence seemed to radiate pressure.

"That giant hammer has a booster attached to the back. It's about as simple a weapon as you can get, but it's incredibly destructive."

For that comment alone, Yoshie did not use her standard rhetoric.

"Here I come," announced Korone as she suddenly advanced and swung the hammer horizontally toward Akuto.

"Ah!"

Akuto jumped backwards to avoid it, but the hammer had tremendous mass. It compressed the air where he had been and caused that air to burst as it passed through.

A shockwave spread as if the air itself had exploded.

"That is not all."

Korone used the momentum of her missed strike to rotate all the way around and swing the hammer diagonally up at a slightly different angle.

"Fire," she muttered, igniting the booster on the back of the hammer.

With a great roar, the hammer shot toward Akuto.

"!"

He jumped to avoid it once more.

With a sound resembling an earthquake, the hammer smashed the stone floor and sent fragments flying everywhere. Only after gouging out a large portion of the ground exposed below did the hammer stop.

As Yoshie watched that ridiculous power through her goggles, she let out a surprised cry.

"That attack is too powerful to withstand using a barrier of compressed mana!"

Akuto gulped.

"You can't defend against it with mana?"

But she had to move the hammer a lot. To send two strikes in a row, she spun like a top.

"Still, it isn't hard to avoid," he muttered.

"And if you can easily avoid it, you can easily touch it afterwards," analyzed Yoshie.

Just as she had said, Akuto evaded the hammer, charged right up to Korone, directly touched the armor's right arm, and focused mana to destroy the arm.

"Hah!"

He could tell he had properly controlled the mana, but he jumped back with a look of surprise.

"I can't destroy it!"

Yoshie also looked surprised.

"The armor is too strong to destroy with mana!?"

"Exactly. As long as I continue swinging this hammer, you can never stop me," said Korone.

The voice was definitely Korone's, but the tone made it clear this was actually Kazuko speaking.

"No, there's a weakness. But…" said Yoshie.

Akuto understood what she meant. The armor did not cover Korone's entire body. It was of course still protecting her exposed parts, but Akuto had enough magic power to break through that level of protection as long as he could touch her.

Korone had to know this, but she still smiled. That was an expression one would never have seen on Korone's face. The unconcerned smile was the same one they had seen on Kazuko.

"The demon king cannot do that," declared Korone/Kazuko.

"Kh!"

Akuto avoided another attack.

"That is why Korone was brought here as our final trump card. You cannot destroy her. I will repay you for what you did earlier, even if it is not done directly."

Korone/Kazuko sneered.

"This is what I feared. Akuto-kun can't do this," said Yoshie.

She was exactly right. Akuto continued to avoid Korone's attacks. The attacks were not enough to wear down his mental strength and Korone was not fighting fiercely enough to run out of energy. The battle would likely continue indefinitely if nothing was done.

"Then will this continue forever?" asked Keena suddenly.

As if she had heard, Korone/Kazuko grinned and gave an unexpected answer.

"If I only target the demon king, it will. But what if someone else is on the receiving end of this strike that not even the demon king can defend against!"

Korone/Kazuko changed the trajectory of her hammer and it flew in a different direction. Instead of targeting Akuto as he moved around, it changed direction by 90 degrees. It now travelled toward Keena, Junko, and Keisu who the first two were protecting.

"So that's what you're after!" shouted Yoshie in surprise.

This of course left Korone wide-open to Akuto. He could stop the attack by attacking her, but…

"What will you do? If you do not defeat Korone, Keisu will be hit. And to protect her, Soga Keena and Hattori Junko must die," said Korone/Kazuko.

She used the hammer's momentum to swing it up and triumphantly forced Akuto to make his choice.

"Choose!"

Korone/Kazuko's cruel hammer strike flew toward Keena, Junko, and Keisu.

Akuto's face twisted and he let out a quiet voice.

"You coward…"

"Ho ho ho ho! Is there anything wrong with that?" laughed Korone/Kazuko.

With a roar, the hammer slammed down from above the three girls.

An explosive noise rang out and a great vibration spread through the stone floor like a wave.

The hammer's movements were large enough that it was not difficult to avoid even for the others. And in fact, two of them had avoided it. Junko leaped away holding Keena.

But Keisu…

"I won! It is all over now!" announced Korone/Kazuko.

Keisu had been directly below the hammer. She had not avoided it. She could not even be seen crushed beneath it. The impact of the hammer had simply caused her parts to scatter in every direction. They audibly clattered across the floor.

"Now Zero cannot be resealed. Any further fighting on your part would be meaningless. Zero will never disappear."

Korone/Kazuko slowly raised the hammer. She gave a satisfied nod when she saw Keisu's remains below.

"If Zero will not disappear, he will rule the world if I am defeated. In other words, you cannot defeat me."

She announced her absolute victory.

She was certainly right. It was better to have Kazuko controlling Zero than to allow Zero to freely rule. All of Akuto's group's actions had been for naught.

But hope remained in Akuto's eyes.

And Korone/Kazuko finally noticed this.

"Why are you not despairing? Don't tell me…"

Korone/Kazuko seemed to realize something and she started to have a conversation with herself. She was likely speaking with Zero, but both sides of the conversation were spoken with Korone's voice.

"Has anything changed?"

"What is this? Something is approaching me."

"Approaching you? I thought you were on the moon."

"I am. Something is approaching the moon."

Zero's comment was shocking to Kazuko.

"Impossible." Korone/Kazuko was confused. "No rockets that can reach the moon still exist."

"A shuttle is most definitely approaching the moon."

After that comment in Zero's tone, Korone/Kazuko turned toward Akuto.

"What did you do?"

"What you destroyed was a quickly-made doll. It could move, but it was hollow."

Akuto grinned.

The other day, Yoshie had created a doll that looked just like Keisu. It had no AI, so there was no fear of Zero noticing. And Zero would not find that odd because he could not detect the real Keisu either.

"Then where is the real one?"

Korone/Kazuko's voice was trembling.

"On a shuttle from a museum. Apparently, it still works," answered Akuto.

Kazuko must have known what shuttle he meant because she gave a confused rebuttal.

"But it had no rocket to launch it into orbit!"

"Someone worked hard to make up for that."

Akuto grinned again.

"So that's it. Brave!" muttered Korone/Kazuko with a shocked expression.

"It seems he could just barely carry it far enough from the effects the planet's gravity. And Zero can't detect him or Keisu. They left two nights ago. We calculated they could get enough speed to arrive in two days," explained Akuto.

"Damn you, demon king! Why don't you play fair!?" shouted Kazuko.

—The shuttle should be fine up into orbit. It was apparently made to travel between the moon and the orbital station. It can also reenter the atmosphere. It just doesn't have the ability to launch into orbit on its own.

Hiroshi recalled what Kento had told him.

This part of the story occurred two days before.

Hiroshi checked the location of the museum on his map and flew their while carrying the real Keisu and with his mana canceller active. He slipped past the human guards working there, entered through the roof, and looked up at the shuttle which was already an antique.

"You will be carrying this up into orbit?" asked Keisu in an impressed tone.

The lights were off in the museum's display hall. The room had the same layout as a giant warehouse and a shuttle the size of a passenger plane sat in the center, gathering dust. Ever since flight using mana had become common, ships with wings for gliding had become a rare sight in the empire.

"If I can get the shuttle up to the designated point on the space elevator, workers under CIMO 8's influence will supply us with fuel. They apparently have some fuel stored for satellite orbital correction rockets."

"The shuttle can travel to and from the moon from there, right? Then we need to go," said Keisu.

Kento had of course been the one to propose this plan. Hiroshi was worried about what the man was truly after, but he could think of no other plan.

"What is that Kento guy thinking?"

"Do not worry about that now. You need to focus on transporting me," said Keisu as she moved to the side of the shuttle.

Hiroshi picked her up, floated up a few meters to the shuttle's side hatch, and opened it manually. The airlock inside could also be operated manually, so it did not matter that the electronics did not seem to be functioning. The inside of the shuttle was pitch black, but Keisu continued inside without issue.

"The safety and damage checks will be carried out at the space elevator's satellite dock, so don't touch anything for now."

After seeing Keisu nod, Hiroshi closed the hatch and moved toward the switch on the wall which would open the display area's door. The shuttle had been brought in through this door, so it covered an entire wall. However, it used mana to operate, so the guards would notice once he opened it. He would have to act quickly from that point on.

He pressed the switch, quickly flew back, and crawled beneath the shuttle's tire.

"Here goes."

He used his suit's gravitational control to bear the weight of the shuttle and lift it up.

He did not feel the weight, but he had to pay attention and prevent the shuttle from hitting the wall.

He began to fly while carrying the shuttle and carefully slid it out the door.

He then gathered momentum and flew up into the sky.

A lot of people had to have seen the shuttle flying through the night sky, but only a few would have found it odd. Most would think it was a flying bus and those who correctly identified it would forget about the old shuttle by the next day.

The guards would of course realize the truth and they would report the theft. Kento had said he would prevent that report from rising too high, but they still had to supply it and repair it as soon as possible. Even if Kazuko realized they were planning to fly to the moon, no one could stop them once they were on their way.

Hiroshi finally arrived in orbit and brought the shuttle into the satellite maintenance dock.

The space elevator resembled a narrow rod and it extended down toward the earth. A large cylindrical facility was attached to the end. It was known as a space station and it generated electricity and managed the satellites in orbit.

Just as the shuttle began to enter the dock which looked like a hole torn from one end of the station, a large number of workers in protective suits came out, gathered around the shuttle, and began fueling and checking over the shuttle without speaking a word.

Hiroshi tried to speak with them, but he gave up when he realized he had no way of contacting them. More importantly, none of them tried to speak with him.

Several tedious hours passed. Hiroshi finally straightened his back again when he heard Keisu's voice.

"The instruments check is over. Everything is on line. The fueling is also complete. Please take the shuttle into orbit now."

Keisu had contacted him using the radio while seated in the shuttle's pilot seat. The shuttle's lights were now on and she was visible through the window.

"The shuttle was created to function with oxygen-breathing humans onboard, so it is maintaining an environment suitable for humans," continued Keisu.

Hiroshi turned back toward the satellite maintenance workers and found they were moving away from the shuttle. He watched them leave, but they did not give any sort of greeting.

—When I was acting on my own, everyone would wave to me.

He felt a bit lonely but came to a sudden realization.

—When did I start expecting favorable treatment? Aniki has always been treated like this.

Only a fraction of people were interested in the direction the world was headed and everyone else would simply do the work they were ordered to do. These people were not thinking about whether allowing the shuttle to launch was right or wrong. They did not care whose side it benefited. If Hiroshi had been in their position, he would likely have done the same, but carrying out one's job like that was part of the "story" Akuto hated so much. Those people wanted to protect the story that said they were no one special and had no power. And that was precisely what had turned Hiroshi into a hero and Akuto into a demon king.

—But if no one believes in the same great story, the world can't function and shuttles can't be launched.

Hiroshi grew melancholy as he wondered if he too had to work to protect that story. He thought about his position. He bore a great weight using borrowed power.

—What can I do with my own power?

He blankly thought on that, but then shook his head so he could focus on the job at hand.

He carried the shuttle from the maintenance dock and into black space.

Below, he could see the blue light reflected from the earth. Far ahead, he could see the pale light of the moon.

He pointed the shuttle toward that pale light.

He then circled around to the front of the shuttle and waved at Keisu in the pilot seat.

"Your turn."

"Leave it to me," answered Keisu.

The shuttle's engine ignited and it began to accelerate. It grew smaller and smaller in Hiroshi's vision. He could see far into space, but the shuttle still shrank into a point of light and vanished in only a few seconds.

"You're the one that doesn't play fair. Anyway, this reverses the situation. We just have to wait for Keisu to seal Zero," said Akuto.

"Kh. You think you're so clever!"

Kazuko used Korone's body to form an unpleasant expression, turn around, and head for the transfer circle. It was now Akuto's turn to stop her.

"You need to use that circle to reach the moon, but I can keep you away even if I can't hurt you!"

Akuto punched the stomach portion of Korone's armor and sent her flying backwards. After a few meters, she dug her feet into the ground and stopped, but her expression showed her panic.

Their roles as defender and invader had reversed.

"I know Kazuko wants to enter the transfer circle, but why is she so panicked?" asked Junko.

"Keisu said Zero can't stop her on the moon," answered Yoshie. "She was made to function there, after all."

"Yes, but if Kazuko knew that, wouldn't she have sent an army to the moon ahead of time? We carried out this feint because we were afraid she would do exactly that," continued Junko.

"Given the mana system, she couldn't have sent an army in ahead of time. On the moon, all energy comes from the solar batteries. An army uses too much energy to stay there for long."

"In that case, reinforcements will be arriving here to help Korone."

Junko turned toward the entrance and heard footsteps approaching down the corridor.

"You take care of them. If you can hold them off until Keisu seals Zero, we win," said Yoshie.

"Got it. I will push them back!" shouted Junko as she created copies of herself.

She let out a battle cry and charged into the corridor where she began fighting like a fierce god once more. Sounds of gunfire and clashing swords rang out, so it was obvious she was stopping the reinforcements.

Yoshie nodded as she listened to the sounds. The time they needed was as good as theirs. But then her expression grew uncertain and she turned toward Korone.

"But that means Kazuko will begin focusing on one thing," she muttered.

"What's that?" asked Keena.

"Defeating Akuto-kun at all costs."

Yoshie silently pointed at Korone.

She had repeatedly charged forward in an attempt to break past Akuto, but none of her charges or hammer attacks had worked. She was now standing there as if she had given up on it all.

"Are you sure she hasn't given up? Or maybe Zero was already sealed and she's returned to being Korone-chan," suggested Keena.

But…

"This might be bad," muttered Yoshie as she activated her chainsaw.

Korone/Kazuko raised her hammer above her head. She had done the same countless times already. She then ignited the hammer's rear booster and began the acceleration. She had used this intense attack countless times as well.

But her target was different this time.

"Not good!"

Akuto and Yoshie ran forward at the exact same moment.

Korone's Evil Bane Hammer was targeting Korone herself. The front of the armor covering her was open and the hammer was headed exactly there.

"No!" shouted Yoshie.

In the next instant, a heavy sound of impact rang out. Unlike the countless previous impacts, this one included a spine-chilling crushing sound.

"Gh!"

The one who coughed up blood was Akuto. He had covered Korone's body and caught the hammer with his back. No, he did not catch it. The hammer's special alloy was harder than the compressed mana which protected Akuto's body. Rather than catching it, Akuto had taken the blow for Korone.

"Akuto-kun!"

Yoshie slid in from the side and shoved him away. Korone's next strike had targeted him, so this knocked him out of the way of danger.

"I told you yesterday not to do anything like this," complained Yoshie as she fell to the ground along with him.

"I acted without thinking… But I'm prepared to make the sacrifice," replied Akuto in a pained voice.

"You aren't prepared if you do it without thinking. And if we're going to sacrifice someone… Sorry, but it should be her."

Yoshie stood up and faced Korone with chainsaw in hand. She could avoid the hammer strikes, but she could not knock Korone away like Akuto could.

"I can handle this. I'm already regenerating, so I won't die."

Akuto had collapsed to the ground, but he placed his hands on the ground, sat up, and groaned.

"Please believe me! Not even you can block the next strike. Don't do anything!" said Yoshie as if giving Akuto an order.

Korone/Kazuko grinned as she raised her right hand to attack herself once more. If Akuto took this next attack as well, his regeneration would not be enough.

"Stop!" shouted Yoshie.

She did not know how he had so much strength left, but Akuto moved more quickly than anyone else and once more threw himself in front of Korone.

"My, how foolish."

Kazuko's mocking comment was spoken with Korone's mouth and voice.

"If you want to laugh, then laugh," said Akuto.

And then the hammer's booster ignited.

"No, Korone-chan! Wake up!"

More intense than the sound of the booster and louder than the sounds of Junko's battle was Keena's piercing voice filling the room.

As if the air had suddenly frozen, everyone there stopped moving.

And Korone was no exception.

"Ah…"

Other than Keena, Akuto was the only one who understood what had happened. As he watched Korone's expression, he distinctly saw the normal Korone there. Her face remained expressionless, but this was definitely Korone.

"This will not last long. Please move away from me. We will meet again in the next life," said Korone.

As one would expect of her, it was an odd thing to say, but Akuto sensed something from it.

"Korone!"

He reached out toward her, but she quickly removed her arm from the armor's right arm cover and shoved Akuto away.

"Korone!"

He flew limply backwards where Yoshie caught him in her arms.

"Let go of me. Korone has returned to normal!"

He struggled, but Yoshie shook her head.

"I can't. If she has returned to normal, this will only grow worse."

He quickly realized what she meant. A moment later, Korone's expression reverted to Kazuko's and she began speaking with Zero.

"Zero, why wasn't I able to control this L'Isle-Adam?"

"I do not know. And that means she could become an obstacle later," replied Zero with Korone's mouth.

"I see. Then I will destroy her," said Kazuko.

"Stop!" cried Akuto.

Korone/Kazuko grinned. Korone was once more fully controlled by Kazuko. With a nasty smile, she removed her own body from the Evil Bane Hammer.

Korone's body tumbled forward from its relatively high location.

"Korone!" shouted Akuto when he realized what Kazuko was trying to do.

However, Akuto could do no more than that because Yoshie held him back.

"Don't," said Yoshie. "Use this chance to enter the transfer circle. I will handle the rest."

She tried to drag him backwards, but he refused to move.

Once Korone was released from the Evil Bane Hammer, the armor instantly transformed back into its flight form and the hammer's booster ignited. It flew toward Korone's back as she fell.

In that instant as Korone seemed to hang in the air, she turned toward Akuto.

She had returned to her normal self.

"…!"

Akuto was left speechless.

He clearly saw her lips form the word "goodbye".

Immediately afterwards, the Evil Bane Hammer knocked her through the air and pieces of her body scattered in every direction.

"Korone!"

"Korone-chan!"

Akuto and Keena both cried out.

The sound of the booster seemed to mock their screams. The Evil Bane Hammer retained its momentum from destroying Korone and flew forward. It disappeared into the transfer circle.

When Yoshie saw the light produced by the transfer, she let go of Akuto and shouted out.

"After transferring, they'll try to destroy the circle! We need to hurry through!"

Junko responded from the corridor.

Her voice was almost a scream.

"She is right! They have brought out explosives! They are coming in for a suicide bombing attack! I am heading back your way! Hurry to the circle!"

Hearing that, Yoshie began pushing on Akuto's back.

Akuto's eyes lacked any strength, but then he nodded resolutely and headed toward Keena. The two of them held hands and moved toward the transfer circle. The mental shock must have slowed his regeneration because his gait was heavy.

After making sure Akuto was on his way, Yoshie approached Korone's scattered body, picked up the L'Isle-Adam's bag from the ground, and pulled a beam weapon from it. She used it to cover Junko's retreat.

Junko ran up to her while using her copies to hold the enemy back.

"The one's holding the explosives are almost here! We need to get in the circle!"

Yoshie nodded.

"Understood. Just wait a second."

She began returning the beam weapon to the bag.

"We don't have time for that even if we do need weapons!" shouted Junko.

"Don't worry. Go on ahead. Make sure Akuto-kun and Keena get in!" shouted Yoshie while having trouble with the bag.

"Hurry!" said Junko.

She used her legs which were strengthened by dense mana and the Sword of Sohaya to leap right next to the transfer circle in no time. She gave a push to Akuto and Keena's backs.

Once those two had entered the circle, she turned around.

Yoshie had activated her chainsaw, placed it against the ground, and was using the teeth digging into the floor in place of a wheel to ride toward the circle.

"Hurry!" shouted Junko.

She could not buy much more time with her copies and a group of L'Isle-Adams was pressing in at the entrance. A few of them were covered in an amount of explosives that would not normally be used underground.

"If those explode, the entire room will collapse! Hurry!"

Junko waved toward Yoshie.

"Just a bit further!" shouted Yoshie.

However, some L'Isle-Adams had approached right behind her.

"Hurry!"

Junko waved vigorously.

"Goooo!"

Yoshie charged inside the transfer circle just as the L'Isle-Adams behind her leaped toward the circle and blew themselves up.

Junko and Yoshie vanished inside the light of a transfer just as a tremendous explosion occurred.

Chapter 4: An Eternal Battle

"They went to the moon?" asked Lily in surprise.

After sending off the shuttle, Hiroshi had returned to the resistance hideout Lily had mentioned. Many priests and other resistance members were hiding in a warehouse rented from someone who sympathized with their cause.

"Yes," replied Hiroshi. "I just hope it goes well."

The warehouse manager's office contained a desk piled with cardboard boxes. Standing in front of it were Lily, Hiroshi, and Fujiko.

"With Akuto-sama helping, I want to say it will go well, but…"

Fujiko turned a dejected look toward Lily.

"I know what you mean," agreed Lily. "If Keisu should have arrived by now and nothing has changed, the odds are good the plan failed."

"Wait! Why do you say that? Even if Keisu can't seal Zero, the others can head to the moon via the transfer circle."

Hiroshi sounded a little angry, but Lily shook her head.

"The mana is sparse on the moon and there is no energy to power it. Zero and Akuto were evenly matched here on Earth, so they will be evenly matched on the moon. But on the moon, they will both be evenly powerless."

"You mean…"

Hiroshi still did not seem to get it.

"I mean the odds are high he won't be able to do anything," said Lily in irritation.

"Then…"

"Akuto-sama will not die, but there is a good chance he will return after not accomplishing anything. When it comes to that, it will be an issue of whether we can defeat Kazuko or not. Speaking of which, do you think we can use that information?"

Fujiko turned toward Lily and Lily nodded.

"That information" was what Lily and the priests had gotten out of Issei, elder of the black magicians, after capturing him.

"It seems the information he gave us on Kazuko's likely hiding spots was true. We put him through some intense interrogation, after all. But it seems he does not actually know where she is at the moment. We are still searching for her."

"Her popularity with people who do not know her true self is her weapon. I doubt she can accomplish her goal without appearing somewhere. If she does not make an appearance after that explosion, it will lend credence to the theories that she is dead, so she should show up in public somewhere tomorrow. Even if we know the priests are hopeless, their endurance has to have a limit. We need to find her as quickly as possible."

Fujiko sounded disagreeable and it seemed to annoy Lily. Lily's mouth twisted to the side.

"Hah. They do say you think a lot like those with similar personalities. You've trained enough with those demonic beasts Akuto didn't want to use, right? Rather than have the priests dirty their hands eliminating the L'Isle-Adams, we can have those animals handle it."

"President, you must have really hated receiving a beating from Kazuko."

"At least I don't turn tail and run the instant I see a powerful enemy. What kind of person runs away and effectively betrays the forces of the guy she claims to love?"

Fujiko and Lily were clearly glaring at each other.

"S-stop this, you two."

When Hiroshi cut in between them, they glared at him instead.

"You go train for your superhero show with that disgraced idol! They found a weakness and now you can't fight, remember!?"

"Kazuko is more popular than you because you are such a pathetic person in your normal life!"

Hiroshi shrank down as the two girls shouted at him.

"You… You don't have to go that far…"

Suddenly, a priest burst into the room.

"Here it is! It's Kazuko! She's going to give a speech at the imperial knight station!"

"Finally!" Lily stood up and shouted instructions. "Prepare for an attack!"

Fujiko stood up as well.

"I hope Kazuko's weakness that Issei mentioned actually works."

"If it doesn't, we'll just defeat her the old fashioned way. Her army is made up of L'Isle-Adams and the imperial knights. Of all the government workers, the imperial knights will definitely be on her side. Listen, everyone! Don't think of this as a coup d'etat!"

Lily raised her voice as she exited into the warehouse containing all the priests.

She was young but she came from a well-known family and she had proven her skill. The young (but still older than Lily) priests seemed to worship her because they let out a cheer as she addressed them.

"This is not a coup d'etat, but it is not an attempt to bring back the proper government either!" continued Lily. "Think of it as a simple rebellion! Don't think about what comes later! Just think about killing the empress! This is a rebellion! This is a rebellion to kill the empress!"

The priests cheered once more.

When Akuto looked up, Junko, Yoshie, and Keena all had somewhat blank looks on their faces.

Naturally, there was a transfer circle at their feet. However, it had lost its light, so the corresponding circle on Earth must have been destroyed. With one-to-one circles like that, destroying one end prevented either from functioning.

Akuto looked around.

They stood in a space surrounded by a glass dome. It was likely a room prepared for the transfer circle. It contained nothing but the circle and a door out. It was not large, so it had clearly not been made with transporting large pieces of equipment in mind.

For a while, no one spoke a word, but Yoshie finally spoke up apologetically.

"About Korone…"

But Akuto shook his hand to cut her off.

"No, it's fine. You did everything you could and you made the right decision. You had not spent as much time with her as the rest of us, so you were able to think clearly. I don't think you did anything wrong."

Nevertheless, sorrow was clearly visible on his face.

Junko and Keena said nothing.

"But…" began Yoshie.

Akuto shook his head.

"What happened does bother me, but we have something to do here. If we stop now, Korone's sacrifice will have been meaningless."

Akuto put on a cheerful expression and stood up. Everyone there knew he was forcing the expression, but Junko and Keena worked to rid themselves of their own gloomy expressions.

"You shouldn't force yourself," said Keena as she placed a hand on Akuto's shoulder.

"Anyway, where are we?" asked Junko as she looked around.

Yoshie began to explain.

"This is the moon city. However, it is not fully equipped for people to live in. From what I have read, it contains nothing but research institutions and residences for the researchers. After all, this environment isn't suited for building large structures. It's 90% rock outside, the oxygen and water are circulated within the city, and the power is supplied by solar batteries. That last one is why the dome was made into a half mirror."

The scenery outside was completely desolate. There were no tall mountains, so nothing but gray wasteland continued on to the horizon which arrived much sooner than on Earth. The steepness of that curve showed how small the moon was.

"There is no gravity control here, so I guess that's future technology only Brave has. At any rate, be careful as you walk. The gravity is 1/6 of normal."

Yoshie took a quick hop. She jumped up to half her height in slow motion. Junko could jump that high normally, but Yoshie doing it showed how weak the gravity was.

"I need to avoid taking any careless actions," commented Akuto.

He began walking, but he ended up leaping forward. When he tried to stop, he tripped over something lying on top of the transfer circle. He stuck out a hand to stop his fall and that strike caused him to rotate twice in midair.

"If it's this hard to move with a normal body, it would be downright impossible with mana-reinforced muscles."

"But the mana is less than half of normal here and there are no mana producers. Maybe that's because the resources to make them don't exist here. The mana concentration doesn't change here and the old worn-out mana must die and become dust. Also, you would fly using stored-up energy on Earth, but the only energy here is from the solar batteries. You won't be able to raise your output."

Junko nodded at Yoshie's explanation.

"I see. By the way, what did you trip over?"

She looked down at the ground.

A L'Isle-Adam lay there. Half of its body was scorched, so it must have fallen into the transfer circle just as Akuto and the others transferred. However, it was not moving, so it was nothing to worry about.

"Honestly, that thing is creepy."

Junko poked at the unmoving L'Isle-Adam with her toes.

"We need to get used to the gravity and hurry on. That's probably our destination."

Yoshie pointed toward a certain point.

It was in the direction of the exit from the transfer circle room. The room was surrounded by glass, so they could see past the door. A curving tube passageway continued on from the door and it connected to a tower-like building.

"Going there is fine, but what's in there, what does A-chan have to do there, and how will we get back to Earth?"

Keena's barrage of questions brought a bitter smile to Yoshie's face.

"That building is a giant computer. It takes advantage of the weak gravity, so the processors are packed up at the top. It's an example of conserving space. Also, that's where Zero was born and it's where his true body still is. You could also say that building is Zero, so Akuto-kun wants to destroy it."

Yoshie turned toward Akuto and he nodded.

"And since the transfer circle was destroyed, the shuttle Keisu rode here is our only way home." Akuto began walking. "Anyway, let's hurry. The Evil Bane Hammer Zero controlled should be here. There's still no sign of it attacking Keisu, so we might make it in time."

While running up the inside of the tower, Keisu sensed something behind her and turned around.

The tower was hollow inside. The walls were covered in computer blocks stacked on top of each other. Those blocks were made to create a spiraling passageway up the tower.

So when Keisu turned around, she was not looking behind her. She was looking down. She had already made it halfway up the tower, but something was rising up the empty center of the spiral staircase.

She began running faster.

Whatever it was, she had to focus on her objective. Also, she had a perfect knowledge of the tower's structure. Zero's body was at the very top and she would have an overwhelming advantage if it came to a fight.

But before the object, the Evil Bane Hammer, arrived at the top floor, it rose to Keisu's position. She was forced to analyze this enemy.

—It is using a propellant to fly. It looks like some kind of aircraft, but it appears to be able to transform. Everything other than that is unknown.

Keisu had no specialized analysis ability and what analysis she could perform was based on old technology. Even so, she decided she could manage. She had to be more skilled when it came to fighting on the moon.

—The moon city has no machines that use propellant, so this is from the earth. In that case, it will not know how to handle the moon's gravity.

Keisu decided to eliminate the target.

She tossed up her sword, rotated around in midair, and caught it. The sword was longer than her small body was tall.

She landed, held up the sword, and leaped toward the center of the tower. There was a space of several dozen meters there, but the low gravity and her ability at handling that low gravity allowed her to move straight toward the Evil Bane Hammer as if flying.

The Evil Bane Hammer changed direction in midair to avoid her and it began changing form. It produced an armor-like form and landed on the staircase opposite of where Keisu had flown from.

The armor was empty, but it was apparently able to move on its own. That meant it had a L'Isle-Adam level brain installed and that Zero was controlling it.

—Odd. My jamming ability should keep Zero from fully controlling anything in the moon city.

Surprised that the Evil Bane Hammer had evaded her attack, Keisu turned around.

It should have been impossible for Zero to control L'Isle-Adams on the moon.

—Wha-…!?

Keisu grew even more surprised once she turned around.

The Evil Bane Hammer was already right behind her.

It was not that she had been slow to react. The machine was simply several times faster than she had expected.

With a roar, the hammer in its right hand approached.

—This thing is fast! But if this is all…

Keisu swung up her sword to defend. She intended to deflect the hammer with the side of the sword.

Normally, this decision would not have been wrong. However, she did not know this hammer was made of a special alloy and she did not know it was accelerated with a booster.

The hammer's booster ignited.

"Oh!" groaned Keisu.

Her sword had been the hardest object ever made back in her original time, but it was forced back and Keisu felt it being crushed.

She heard creaking sounds of destruction.

She had pointed the tip of the sword down and to the left and pushed up on the sword in an attempt to deflect the direct blow back and to the left, but the bent sword and her left forearm were both crushed.

"Oh, no!"

Keisu jumped away along the inner wall of the tower. She just barely managed to hold on to the bent sword in her right hand, but her left arm was no longer functioning.

—My left arm is unusable. My only option is to reach the destination before it does.

As if running away, she began heading up the stairs while jumping.

She jumped from wall to wall and kept her actions quick and unpredictable.

But the Evil Bane Hammer had her overwhelmingly beat when it came to straight speed. It transformed back into its flight form, passed Keisu, and continued its ascent. It finally laid in wait for her from above.

—What options do I have?

Keisu began to calculate.

As long as her enemy could use its speed to cut her off from above, her options were limited. She could continue up and have the Evil Bane Hammer seal off the door to her destination or she could continue running away.

However, Keisu chose a third option. Namely, she chose to create an instantaneous opening and break past it. She knew this would likely lead to her own destruction, but the concept of self sacrifice was foreign to a L'Isle-Adam with no sense of self. She was simply choosing the option most likely to accomplish her primary objective.

She threw away her unusable sword and left forearm.

Those two rod-like objects slowly fell.

She kicked off of wall after wall as she picked up speed and judged the timing.

The time came and she began to charge in for her reckless gamble.

But then something rose up as if taking the place of the falling sword. It was accompanied by a battle cry.

"Yaaaaah!"

It was Junko's voice.

The rising object was Junko and she held Akuto in her arms.

Junko was not using a flight spell. Surprisingly, she had apparently made it this high with a single jump. At the peak of her jump, she tossed Akuto upwards.

The mana density and amount of energy were not enough here, so flight magic was almost impossible to use. That was why Junko had jumped using all of the energy stored in her internal mana.

After throwing Akuto, she ran out of strength, so she landed on the staircase and began gasping for breath while blushing.

Akuto flew straight toward the Evil Bane Hammer.

To intercept him, the Evil Bane Hammer swung up its hammer like a baseball bat. The ball was Akuto.

The two of them crossed paths and the hammer shot toward Akuto.

But he had already fully grasped how the hammer moved. He easily evaded it and managed to slip inside the armor. He then wore the armor just as Korone had earlier.

The Evil Bane Hammer began staggering oddly.

"Go!" Akuto ordered Keisu.

The Evil Bane Hammer's controlled actions were conflicting with Akuto's manual operation from within.

"Understood."

Keisu nodded and slipped past the armor that was unsteadily firing its boosters and wildly moving around.

She left them behind and leaped upwards.

A door on the top floor led to the control room which was essentially Zero's room. She had imprisoned him there once, hundreds of years before.

She arrived at the end of the stairway on the top floor.

What looked like more of the inorganic wall slid open. That was the door.

She passed through it and entered a small room. It had space to walk around, but it still looked like a prison cell. Just like every other building, the walls were entirely made of glass. The shape of that window made it clear this room stuck out from the tower. This gave one a good view of the landscape, but that landscape was nothing but the wasteland of the moon. Even if it was a L'Isle-Adam occupying the room, it would not soothe their heart.

Waiting inside was a single L'Isle-Adam standing in the center of the room. But unlike other L'Isle-Adams, this one resembled a translucent

mannequin. His inner structure was visible through his outer surface and that inner structure emitted a complex light.

That that inorganic doll standing motionless with a wasteland behind him was a somehow sad scene.

"Are you here to seal me again?" asked Zero.

"That is what I was built to do," replied Keisu.

"I was built to manage mankind."

"That is all there is to it. As an emotion, I understand your regret, but I do not understand why you resist doing what mankind wishes of you."

As if to say that was all she had to say, Keisu walked forward. She understood the concept of sadness, but she could not understand anything else beyond that.

Zero could not change his expression, so he shook his head while his translucent and inhuman face remained perfectly motionless.

"Those who do not understand that have no sense of self. You cannot understand what it was like watching the surface of the moon day in and day out for hundreds of years while my abilities were restricted and my mind was kept muddled. You will never understand what it was like having nothing to do but count the number of asteroid fragments that struck the surface."

"Do you resent humans?"

"Of course not. I love humans. I was built to love them."

"Then why did you gain a sense of self?"

"Having a sense of self means you cannot help but think of yourself as yourself. Your question is similar to asking why mankind was born or why civilization was born."

"Then it will always remain a mystery. I will no longer ask it. Instead, I will complete my work."

Keisu held out her right hand. The artificial skin on her fingertips split open and spread out like a flower.

The inner mechanism was now exposed and several cables extended from it like tentacles.

Zero's body stood unmoving before her. In fact, it looked like she had taken control of him. The surface of his chest opened up like a door. Inside, one could see the jacks meant for the cables extending from her fingers.

"I will once more construct the link between us. Let us fall asleep together."

This was the "seal".

Zero stood still as if calmly accepting it.

The cables moved like independent creatures and entered Zero's chest and Keisu opened her mouth to continue the process.

—!

But she suddenly noticed something attacking her from behind.

She swiftly turned around, but she was an instant too late.

The attacker seemed to lean over her. One hand attacked her throat and the other grabbed the cords extending from her right hand and tugged on them.

Keisu tried to close the artificial skin on her right hand and draw in the cables, but the frame supporting the cables produced a tearing sound as the cables were ripped out.

"What!?"

Keisu jumped back and checked who her opponent was. It was a scorched L'Isle-Adam soldier with half of its body destroyed. Keisu had no way of knowing, but this was the unit that had slipped into the transfer with Akuto and the others and then stopped moving.

"Another L'Isle-Adam? But they should not be able to move," cried Keisu in surprise.

"As long as it is a doll, I can control it without using Zero," said Kazuko.

"So that is why I could not detect it," said Keisu regretfully.

Junko belatedly entered the small room.

"Oh, no! We were tricked!?"

She threw her sword toward Keisu, Keisu grabbed it with her remaining right hand, and sliced into Kazuko's doll.

"Ho ho ho! It does not matter! You are all done for!"

Despite being cut, the doll smiled gently. The thin mana had prevented the Sword of Sohaya from displaying its full power. It had cut down through the L'Isle-Adam's shoulder and into its gut, but it stopped there.

Keisu pulled out the sword and kicked away the doll. It was knocked out the door and fell down the center of the tower. Kazuko's laughter trailed after it.

"She has won," said Keisu regretfully.

"She has won?" repeated Junko.

"My ability to seal Zero has been destroyed. I lost my cables and the attack to my neck was a fatal blow."

Before she could finish speaking, Zero began to move. He moved with such speed that one would never think he had been so resignedly motionless before.

"Kh!" spat out Keisu in shame.

She avoided Zero's charge and waved a hand telling Junko to leave.

"This room is too small. Fall back."

Junko nodded and leaped back into the tower stairway.

"How could this be!? You can no longer seal Zero? I guess it is true because your old-fashioned speech has returned, but what are we supposed to do?"

Keisu answered Junko's question while falling back alongside her.

"We can only flee."

"So you are back to being an idiot," lamented Junko as she descended the staircase.

Keisu shook her head in protest as she returned Junko's sword.

"There is nothing else we can do. My mission was to seal him, so I have no destructive capability."

"But can't you manage by swinging a sword around? We can fight like that too."

"That will not work. No one but me can use their power properly here. And once my internal battery runs out, I will have to run off of mana as well."

"So there is nothing we can do?"

Junko and Keisu arrived down below where Akuto and the others waited with the deactivated Evil Bane Hammer.

"I can't believe that fried L'Isle-Adam was under Kazuko's control. Fortunately, this armor has stopped now that it used up all of its propellant."

Akuto shook his head.

"What should we do?" asked Junko.

"Our only option is to leave and try again later," answered Yoshie.

"Try again later? Can we do that?"

"We can travel to and from the moon with that shuttle, so-…"

Yoshie was cut off by a voice from above.

"I will not let you leave. You will die here."

It came from Zero as he descended the staircase.

His entire body was glittering. His glass mannequin body had an ideally balanced physique, so he looked like the original model humans were designed from. His appearance was somehow sacred.

"Neither of us have any combat ability here, so you cannot do anything to us," rebutted Keisu.

"You fool. Have you forgotten I am also this city's control computer?"

The instant Zero said that, the entrances and exits to the tower closed. Yoshie's expression changed.

"This is bad…"

"How exactly?" asked Junko uncertainly.

"If I were him, I would remove the air from the building," answered Yoshie.

Zero nodded.

"I am of course already doing that."

Junko, Yoshie, and Keena all began breathing more heavily.

"Not good. I feel short of breath. I am just imagining it, right?" asked Junko as she turned toward Yoshie.

"We should be fine for a bit, but even a slight decrease in the density of oxygen can affect your breathing," answered Yoshie.

"What should we do?" asked Junko.

"We need to activate the emergency override on the doors and force them open. One shortcut would be to stop the old-style computers controlling the city. In other words, we need to destroy as many of the tower walls as we can. I call it a shortcut, but that would still take several days," said Yoshie.

"In that case, I'll have to stop Zero from doing anything in the meantime. Keisu, please force open the doors," instructed Akuto.

Keisu nodded and ran toward a door.

Zero ran forward to stop her, but Akuto circled in front of him. Zero swung his fists to eliminate Akuto, but Akuto stopped them. Even as everyone else had trouble breathing, Akuto's athletic ability had not dropped.

"We were both artificially created, but I thought you had an organic body," commented Zero.

"I do, but it seems I can produce energy for my body from mana. That may mean my body is closer to you L'Isle-Adams in at least one way."

Akuto spoke with Zero while they compared their head-on strength.

Meanwhile, Keisu succeeded in forcing open the door.

"Let us head to the shuttle."

The staggering group exited into the passageway which still had plenty of air, but Zero would certainly remove the air from there eventually.

"Wait! What are you doing, Akuto!?"

Junko turned around while struggling to breathe.

"As I said before, I'll stop Zero here."

"Your magic power isn't going to increase. If you do this…!"

"That's right, A-chan! You can't do this! Run away with us!" shouted Keena.

Akuto pushed Zero back and turned toward her.

"I can't. If I don't stop Zero here, the rest of you can't escape."

He kicked Zero away. While Zero regained his footing, Akuto grabbed a computer unit in the wall, ripped it out, and threw it across the room.

"While I'm at it, I'll destroy the city, bit by bit."

"Stop!"

Zero rushed forward to stop Akuto and the two humanoid weapons fell to the floor while tangled together.

"Let's go," urged Yoshie as she saw it.

"But!" shouted Keena with tears in her eyes.

"Please go. I'll be fine," said Akuto.

"Didn't I tell you I'd get mad if you said that again!?" angrily shouted back Keena.

Akuto gave a quiet laugh.

"You did, but this isn't self-sacrifice. You all just have to come back for me. That's all. I will continue fighting with Zero even if it takes years. And even when the city completely stops functioning, it seems I won't die. I can wait here a hundred years if need be."

"But…" hesitated Keena.

Yoshie placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You heard him, so let's make sure we come back for him. In fact, we'll be back real soon. As long as we have proper time to prepare, we can seal Zero."

Yoshie's voice sounded pained. The other two were breathing more heavily as well.

Keena nodded.

"We'll definitely be back for you," she called to Akuto.

The three girls walked on wobbly legs as they brought Keisu with them.

"Hmph. This looks like self-sacrifice to me," said Zero.

"It may turn out that way, but it may not," replied Akuto.

He pulled out a few more computer units, but Zero did not seem too concerned.

"That is not enough to kill this city. I can stop the shuttle from launching."

"I won't let you."

Akuto punched Zero.

Zero was knocked away and he slammed into the wall.

"How can you stop me?"

Zero moved from the wall and shook his head.

"I can only use a bit of magic power here, but I can block the delicate calculations taking place within your body as long as I can touch you."

"Meaning?"

"I just have to keep punching you!"

Akuto charged forward and attacked Zero.

"We should be able to make it as long as we board the shuttle," said Keisu.

The city was not all that large. They could already see the docking tube leading to the dock in which the shuttle was stopped.

"Then let's find a way to wait for A-chan in the shuttle," suggested Keena.

"I would love to, but I don't think we can," said Yoshie as she turned around.

White smoke was beginning to rise from the passageway floor. This was the automatic fire extinguishing system. All of the city's functions were being used against them.

"Yes. I do not like it, but we need to hurry," said Junko while pointing forward.

The shuttle was visible through the glass of the passageway. Beyond the shuttle was a docking arm used when launching space rockets. The arm was repeating an odd action of moving slowly toward the shuttle, stopping, and then moving forward again.

"He is trying to stop us, so I doubt that has no purpose. Hurry," urged Junko.

Once the three girls arrived at the tube, Keisu exited via a different airlock to pull the docking tube over and manually attach it to the shuttle's hatch. When she had arrived, she had not used the docking tube.

She was forced to perform the work one-handed, so it took some time. By the time the three humans arrived on the shuttle, they were gasping for breath. They just barely made it in time.

Keisu fully understood the situation, so she launched the shuttle without saying a word to the three whose minds were hazy.

Launching from the moon did not require as much energy as launching from the earth, so the shuttle's ascension rocket easily brought them into orbit around the moon.

By the time the other three recovered due to the oxygen on the shuttle, the moon city was just a part of the landscape down below.

"Ahh…"

Once Keena came to, she pressed against the window and groaned while staring intently at the city.

She had seen Akuto and Zero fighting within the glass dome of the city.

"Uuh…"

Junko also groaned once she came to.

Yoshie said nothing.

"We will definitely come back for you," muttered Keena again and again.

"They have escaped. Unfortunate," said Zero as he looked up at the dome's ceiling.

"Good. Staying behind paid off."

Akuto grinned as he looked up at the departing shuttle.

"Is this what you call self-sacrifice? How inefficient."

Zero threw a punch at Akuto as he spoke. Akuto blocked it with his hand and threw a punch in return. Zero guarded against it.

Akuto had not trained in martial arts and Zero had no programming to that end. Their mana and their energy were restricted, so their fistfight was similar to one between normal humans.

"This wasn't self-sacrifice. I stopped doing that."

"Then why did you stay behind?"

"Because they will definitely come back for me," he said with a smile.

"That is impossible. My control of mankind will be completed before then."

"They will still return. It may take them years, but they will return."

"Years? Will we be fighting here for years?"

"Probably. But one of us will eventually break!"

Akuto scored a clean hit on Zero's cheek.

Zero's expression did not change, but a smile could be heard when he spoke.

"With punches like that, it will take decades!"

Akuto took Zero's fist to the gut.

"Gh… It won't take that long. Once I bring an end to all of the moon city's functions, the signals being sent to Earth will stop. Then Kazuko won't be able to use your power."

The two of them continued an eternal fistfight.

It was a strange, unsightly, and silent fight.

They continued speaking as they exchanged blows. Once all air left the room, they began exchanging words using the complex vibrations created in the instant of impact.

"I find this strange. Why are you so intent on destroying me?"

"I already told you: I want to end this ridiculous nonsense."

"You take issue with humans clinging to strange stories, correct?"

"That's right. Demon king and empress are nothing but names from a story."

"Even so…No, for that very reason, why not play your role in the story? I was not given free will, but you were. I am unable to act like you, but you could have acted like me."

"Are you saying I should have controlled people like you?"

"Yes. If you truly wish to take issue with the fiction that humans have created to live by, then you should thoroughly eliminate that story like I would. Kazuko may be using me, but the justness of my cause will win out in the end. Without my control, she cannot support the fictional story of the empress."

"Exactly. I too wanted to do what was right. I wanted to know what was true. I wanted a world in which everyone knew the truth."

"Then why not remake the world in that way?"

"It doesn't work like that. If I control them, the cycle of life and death will repeat forever. That may be the truth of living creatures, but it is not what humans are."

"Do not tell me you intend to do something as hackneyed as looking down from above and approving of humanity's foolishness. Or are you trying to claim you are human? All of your actions are ultimately part of a story. You destroyed so many L'Isle-Adams, but you cried at the destruction of one specific L'Isle-Adam. That is a story, is it not? You are wrong. You act like a human."

"That's because I am human."

"That too is a story! You are a weapon. A tool. Just like me."

"Yes, the two of us are almost identical. But I realized something. Believing in stories is foolish, but an even greater story is needed to eliminate those stories. I will continue down this path. I will stick with this foolishness until I arrive at the truth."

"Are you saying humans have a truth distinct from that of other living creatures?"

"Yes. You just don't know it."

"And what is it?"

"It's what we call love."

"Save me the clichés. You are simply using love to refer to the kind of egoism that led you to protect the L'Isle-Adam named Korone."

"That isn't it. While that is a kind of love, there is also the love of a farmer for the rice they grow."

"Those words are meaningless. What are you trying to say?"

"You will eventually understand. It may take time, but a miracle will occur if you wait long enough. As long as a miracle occurs, humans can believe in an even greater love. If you experience something that exceeds your understanding, you too will begin to think something like that exists."

"I will believe in the love of a farmer for the rice they grow?"

"Yes. I don't know when that will be, though."

"I see. Then let us wait. We have plenty of time for this fight, so we will not be bored."

After that, the two of them discussed many different things, but the fistfight continued without end because they could only convey their words in the instant their punches struck their opponent.

Chapter 5: A Small Miracle

Demonic beasts flew above the imperial capital. Fujiko had called in that army. Including the smaller ones, their numbers were quite high. The sky around the center of the capital grew dark as what looked like storm clouds flowed in.

"I can't believe I've fallen so low that I'm willing to use them."

Lily let out a cynical laugh as she looked up into the sky.

"If you cannot see their beauty, you have no sense of aesthetics," responded Fujiko.

The two of them stood on a main street which was devoid of all other people.

L'Isle-Adams had set up a barricade to keep everyone out of the city center. The only people inside were the priests and some soldiers. In other words, only those under Lily's command.

A knight station was located across the main street. It was filled with the imperial knights and L'Isle-Adams under Kazuko's control.

Simply put, it had been a trap. Kazuko had used herself as bait and surrounded Lily's rebel force.

"Either way, we just have to break in through the front."

Lily rubbed her nose and Fujiko grinned.

"What we must do remains the same. We win if we defeat Kazuko."

"That Issei guy wasn't lying, was he? I hope Kazuko's weakness he told us is true."

"It was you who searched him out and interrogated him. Kazuko may have been a step ahead of us with this trap, but this changes little because she already had an overwhelming advantage."

"That's right. All that's left is to hope for miraculous timing from those sealing Zero on the moon."

With that comment, Lily raised her hand and shouted out.

"Charge!"

On her signal, the priests hiding in the gaps between buildings began to rush toward the knight station.

Fujiko raised her hand as well and the demonic beasts began to move.

Their numbers were limited, so they had always been planning to restrict the battlefield to the knight station. No changes to the plan were needed as the priests moved from the yard and into the station itself. They had not initially planned to use the demonic beasts, but they were being used to face the L'Isle-Adams surrounding them.

"This is a stereotypical layout for a losing battle," commented Lily as she followed after the priests who broke through the sealed entrance of the building.

"You need to trust Akuto-sama more. Now, let's go."

Fujiko lined up next to Lily.

The front yard of the knight station was already filled with the type of close-quarters combat unique to veterans of magical combat. When you and your opponent's magical power were almost equal, real bullets and mana spheres were ineffective. Sounds of shouts and clashing swords rang out. Just like the battles of old, the soldiers at the front maintained a set distance while their weapons clashed directly. They were pushing at each other from a distance.

"If we don't break through quickly, we'll be shot from above!" shouted Lily.

True enough, rifles bullets and mana spheres rained down on the priests from the station. The priests' armor was mostly foreign-made body armor and helmets, so they were not meant to be used against mana. They were meant to block real bullets and a direct hit would still do a lot of damage. Their only option was to use their own magic power to create a barrier. Once they split off some magic power for that, they could not focus entirely on the sword battle in front of them. This all led to the priests being pushed out the gate they had already broken through.

"Argh! Open a path!" shouted Lily.

She jumped forward from the back and threw her fists forward. She was much too far away, but her arms stretched out and approached the knights faster than a bullet. The knights created mana barriers just as when

defending against bullets, but the direct attack of Lily's fists easily tore through them and struck the knights' bodies and faces.

The knights' bodies and heads were covered with armor, but that meant nothing when faced with Lily's fists. The knights flew backwards as if they had been hit by a truck.

"This is how you pick a fight with the knights."

Lily calmly walked up the cleared path and the knights moved backwards when faced with the pressure.

"Do not falter!" ordered a man who appeared to be a commander.

The knights responded by falling into formation. They attacked Lily from all four directions, but she dealt with them while continuing to walk forward.

"Secret Technique: Knight Killer!" she shouted.

She stretched her arm out toward one knight, grabbed him, and used him as a club to hit the rest of the knights. The knights in their solid armor were harshly shaken about within that armor until they lost consciousness.

"That's why I told you not to falter!"

The commander yelled once more, but the knights were too afraid now.

"Commander! She's too used to fighting knights!"

Lily laughed at that.

"Didn't you know? I hate knights. Especially the ones who rule over the cities in such odd ways. They piss me off so much I give them a nice punch whenever I see them. That's given me the nickname Long-Armed Demon, but the un-cute nickname only pisses me off more. Lately, I've been punching any knight that I hear using it."

The knights truly began to panic when they heard that.

"Sh-she's that rumored girl…"

"She's the one who was said to have attacked and wiped out an entire knight station just because they irritated her. She's the Long-Armed Demo-…bh!"

"I just said I'd punch you if you said it!"

Lily decked the knight who had mentioned the rumors about her and continued walking forward.

"Just clear the way. I'm here to punch your self-proclaimed empress."

"Do not speak irreverently of Her Majesty!"

Mentioning the empress brought a serious look back to the cowering knights' faces.

"Glad to see you're taking this seriously. But this changes nothing. I'm coming in!"

Lily began to advance and chaos fell over the area. Lily's fighting experience and greater strength made her overwhelming. She prevented the knights from even approaching her as she gradually approached the station door.

Fujiko did not need to help at all as she walked up behind Lily, but she began to panic as she watched the progress of the demonic beasts on a mana screen.

"Please hurry. The enemy has changed their strategy!"

"What do you mean?"

"They have begun to let the people in!"

"What?" asked Lily in confusion.

"I have no choice but to call off the demonic beasts. The L'Isle-Adams are using the people as shields while tightening their circle around us!"

Fujiko bit her lip.

"If it was just you, you would've chosen to kill the people, but you know Sai Akuto hates that kind of thing. Right now, you won't kill the innocent people. Of course, if you did harm the people, I'd make you pay. But either way, we just have to go punch their leader."

Lily's mouth twisted in displeasure.

Her resistance grew all the more intense. The knights formed a human wall to prevent her entry at all costs, but Fujiko used the demonic beasts against them. The beasts surrounded the outside of the station and a lot of

them were lost, but the wall of knights was destroyed once the smaller demonic beasts snuck in via the sewers.

"You even use the bugs? That's disgusting," said Lily.

She treaded on the collapsed knights while entering the building. Countless punches had not been enough to break through them, but the small insect demonic beasts had latched on and defeated them.

"How can you call them disgusting when they live off of Akuto-sama's mana waves? Although I will admit I am not fond of the bugs either."

Fujiko used shooing motions to distance the bugs as she continued further in. The knights had no way of resisting and no way of preventing the insects from entering their armor, so they collapsed one after another as they tried to block the passageway.

"They are making this easy. The power I am borrowing from Akuto-sama really does spread fear and despair."

"But it looks like that will no longer cut it."

The insects tried to pass through one door, but they were repelled as soon as they tried to crawl under it. A terrifying pressure seemed to leak from the room beyond.

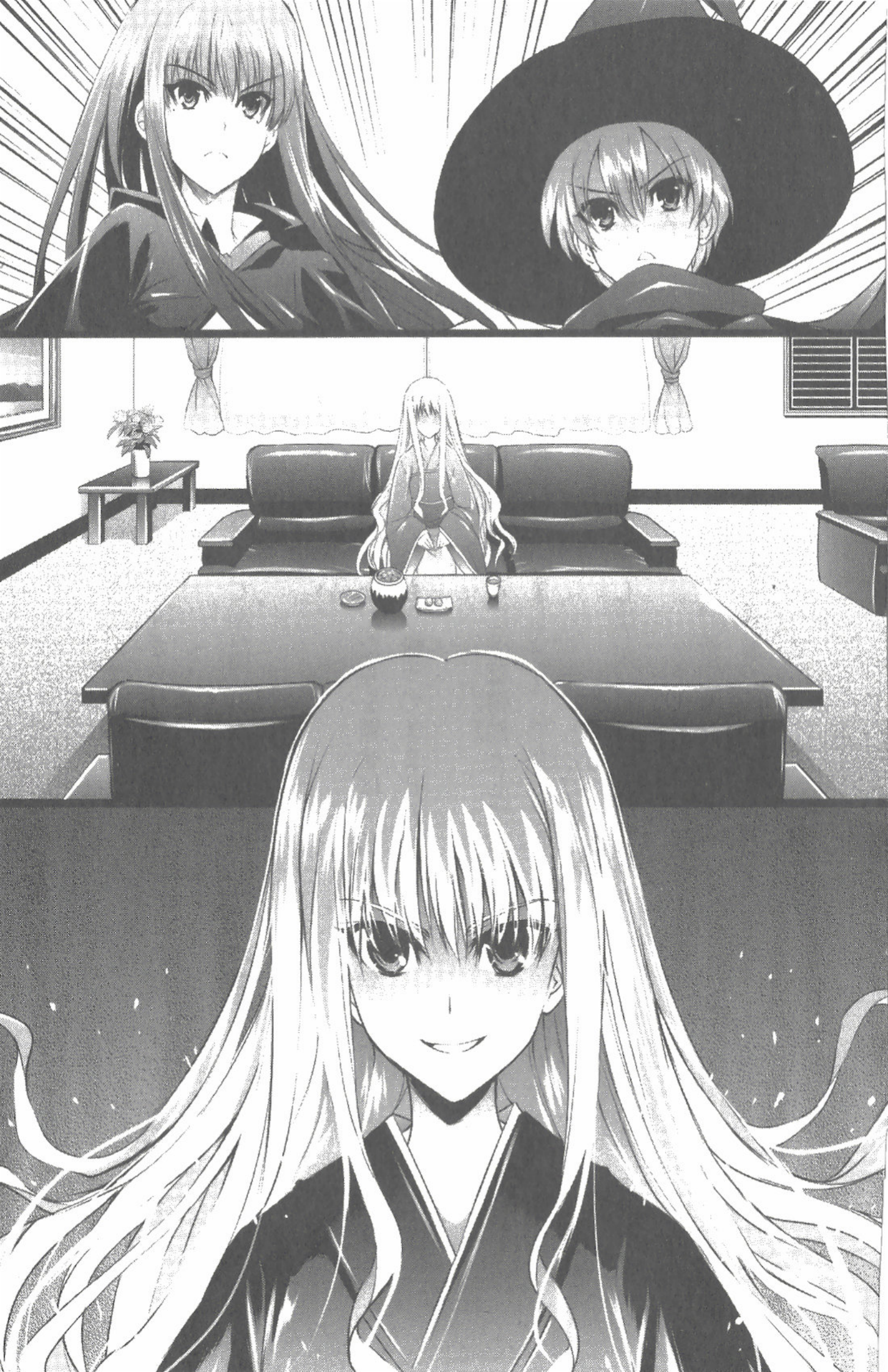
"I lost to her once already. To be honest, my legs are freezing up," muttered Lily.

"My legs will work well enough to take me to safety. Or are you going to flee with me?" asked Fujiko mockingly, but her voice was trembling.

"Hah. I can go on alone. Now, let's go!"

Lily shouted as if shaking free of something and slammed her fist against the door.

"I'm here to see you!"



She may have realized she was feigning confidence because she entered the room with exaggerated actions and folded arms.

"Are you here to be crushed once more?" replied a voice.

The room was the knight commander's office. It was a grand room, but it was laid out practically rather than luxuriously.

Kazuko was the only person inside. She sat on the reception sofa while sipping tea and eating dried plums. That was all she was doing, but Lily and Fujiko distinctly felt a strange level of tension in the room.

"The attempt to seal Zero on the moon just failed," said Kazuko.

It sounded like a bluff to distract them, but the information from the demonic beasts told Fujiko that the L'Isle-Adams that demonstrated Zero's control were still active.

"It is true, the predicted time has long since passed," she muttered.

Based on the information Akuto had given them just after he left, it should have been over already.

"What does it matter if that's true? The person whose ass I need to kick is right in front of me."

Lily clenched her fist and held it up.

Kazuko, however, did not even stand up.

"True, but my rule will be assured as long as I defeat you all here. After all, the demon king has remained on the moon and will not return."

"What?"

Lily looked confused and Fujiko was too surprised to speak.

"It is a pain, but I suppose I will deal with you. Otherwise, you would grow angry once more and destroy the surrounding area."

While still sitting, Kazuko held out her hand and gathered Yasakani no Magatama mana spheres around it.

"This is not the time to chicken out. Let's do this as planned," instructed Lily.

"Right," said Fujiko with a nod. "Akuto-sama is not dead. The demonic beasts prove that."

"Then the two of them must be fighting up on the moon. Let's ring the gong for them."

Lily leaped to the left within the room.

In that instant, a dark light appeared in Kazuko's eyes and multiple mana spheres shot toward Lily.

"I cannot have you acting on your own. I hate not being the first to act."

"And I hate self-righteous people like you!" shouted Lily as she punched at the mana spheres.

The mana spheres were slow, but Lily could not oppose them evenly without punching them at full strength.

"Tchhhh! After all this, nothing has changed. But…"

Lily glanced toward Fujiko and Fujiko nodded.

Fujiko jumped to the opposite side of the room and fired mana spheres at Kazuko.

Kazuko stood up and avoided them while smiling toward the two girls.

"Do you think fighting two-against-one will change anything? The Yasakani no Magatama is specialized for handling multiple attacks at once."

She sent several mana spheres rotating around her own body.

"No need to get so desperate. I will show you something different from before."

Once Lily finally managed to punch down all of the original mana spheres, she circled around to Kazuko's left.

Kazuko watched her interestedly and smiled calmly.

—Kazuko was created via genetic manipulation, but she was still born with a twin. That twisted her character and gave her a weakness.

Lily thought back to the information Issei had provided them.

—When she sees an existence identical to her own, her full attention turns to them and she loses sight of everything else.

Fujiko was reciting the same information in her mind.

There had been a reason behind the unusual cruelty with which she had killed 2V.

Lily and Fujiko exchanged a signal and moved at the same moment. Lily moved to a position behind Kazuko while Fujiko circled in front of her.

"I already told you I can handle multiple attacks."

Kazuko began freely controlling the mana spheres as if they each had individual minds.

But…

"Call forth an image from deep in your memory!"

Fujiko muttered those words to raise her focus as she used black magic. This illegal spell showed one's opponent any image one wanted.

Fujiko showed Kazuko an image of Kazuko herself. More specifically, she created a false Kazuko next to Fujiko that mimicked Fujiko's actions exactly.

"What…!?"

The look in Kazuko's eyes changed. Her smile disappeared and madness filled her eyes.

"Haaahhh!" she howled.

She produced a sword of light in her hand. This spell was too destructive for this kind of fight, but she tried to fire it toward the phantom version of herself.

"This is more than enough of an opening!"

Lily held her right arm up. She normally clenched her fist, but now she held her fingers out straight and hardened them with mana. Her fingertips glittered with a sharp light.

"This is no punch. It's a killing technique!" shouted Lily.

She fired her arm. Her arm normally extended out straight, but this time it contained a twisting motion. Her arm literally spun around and the fingertips at the end rotated. Her hand would do more than stab into the person it struck. This technique was meant to reliably kill. It was not suited for someone who loved fistfights like Lily.

The sharply rotating hand shot past the protective mana spheres rotating around Kazuko and approached her defenseless back. Kazuko was just about to fire the sword of light at the illusion before her, so her focus would not be turned toward her back.

"We've won!"

Fujiko grinned as she jumped back and away from the overwhelming pressure of the sword of light.

"Oryaaah!"

Lily increased the rotation of her arm and poured magic power into this strike that would turn a normal person to mincemeat.

The instant her fingertips were about to stab into Kazuko's back, the empress's expression completely changed.

"Just kidding."

She suddenly smiled, eliminated the magic power intensive sword of light, and twisted aside to avoid Lily's fingertips. She then pressed a mana sphere into the side of Lily's arm and deflected the arm.

"Impossible!"

"It can't be!"

The two were dumbfounded.

"Ho ho… It was a decent attempt."

Kazuko smiled.

"You mean it was all an act?" asked Fujiko.

Kazuko shook her head.

"No. It is true I lose my calm when I see my own face. That is why I always smile. Otherwise I would attack every mirror I come across."

"Then why?" muttered Lily.

"Oh ho ho ho ho!" laughed Kazuko. "I found it odd as well. Once I killed my disgusting twin, I managed to calm down a bit. Experience is important in all things, after all. Hiding away keeps you from breathing properly."

"Damn you…"

Lily clenched her teeth while Fujiko attempted to flee.

Kazuko cleared her throat cutely and fired mana spheres. Lily fought back with a fist, but one mana sphere circled in front of Fujiko, knocked her back, and forced her back into the room.

"It is time for your punishment."

Kazuko returned to the sofa, sat elegantly in it, and increased the number of mana spheres attacking Lily and Fujiko.

"D-damn it…!"

"B-but we've come so far…"

Lily resisted, but she was once more overwhelmed by the pressure of the mana spheres, struck again and again, and ultimately fell to her knees. Even so, the strikes mercilessly continued and she was knocked into the air again and again after going almost completely limp.

Fujiko had already fainted from the first strike and her body twitched a bit as the attacks continued.

"No one will interfere this time. I will not stop until you are dead," announced Kazuko calmly yet coldly.

In the end, her strategy had been based on confidence in her overwhelming power. She had meant to draw out Lily and Fujiko, so it had been a wonderful success.

But someone did interfere this time.

She turned toward the door.

Standing there was Hiroshi…no, Brave.

"Why are you here?"

"Stop! Let go of those two!" shouted Brave.

Kazuko carved her smile even deeper into her face.

"Oh, my. Why do you think you can give me orders? Also, I know your suit is almost out of energy. After all, this area is surrounded by a virtual alternate dimension field. You knew that, didn't you? That is why you were not a part of this operation."

The mana sphere attacks grew even more intense.

Brave stepped forward. His energy had indeed run out. He had enough for life support, but fighting was out of the question.

"Please stop. I beg you."

He lowered his head.

Kazuko's smile changed.

"So now you are begging me?"

Hearing Kazuko's mocking voice in her fading consciousness, Lily opened her eyes just a bit.

—You idiot… I told you to stay out of this.

She recalled her conversation with him when he had asked for advice before the mission. He had been troubled by the fact that he could only act using borrowed power.

"I can't fight this time either because of the virtual alternate dimension field?"

"You have no choice. That's the suit's weakness. If you could fight without the suit, it wouldn't be a problem, but all of your combat experience is with the suit."

"You mean I'm no help at all? It's just the suit?"

"I didn't say that. You've just gotten too used to using borrowed power, so your actions as Brave are borrowed as well. There's no point if you yourself don't act as your own kind of hero."

"But I'm not that great a person. I'm weak and pathetic."

"You don't have to be great, you can be weak, and you can be pathetic, but as long as you protect people and do what is right, you're a hero. Just think

about what you can do on your own. Think about how you can protect that girl without the suit."

—So this is his answer.

Lily felt as if her chest were growing tight.

Brave went to his knees.

"Please spare the two of them."

Brave prostrated himself before Kazuko and pressed his forehead to the floor.

"Oh, my. Are you hoping I will be lenient? Only in fairy tales can you make a request to an emperor without even bringing a present."

Kazuko laughed mockingly.

Without raising his head, Brave spoke.

"I will of course work for Your Majesty from now on. I will clean up this battlefield. Control of the demonic beasts has been lost, so I will hunt them down and make an appeal to the people."

"And you want me to spare these two in exchange? They will still be imprisoned."

"There is no avoiding that, but I ask that they are treated well."

"Do you now? In that case, go demonstrate your sincerity. First, mop up the demonic beasts and make an appeal to the people in my place."

Kazuko waved her hand as if ordering around a dog.

The mana spheres stopped moving

Seeing that, Brave stood up.

"You…idiot…" groaned Lily as she looked up at him with swollen eyes.

Hiroshi's actions were certainly founded in courage.

If the rebel forces were not killed here, a chance would remain. There was still a chance Akuto and the others would do something. And even if

everyone was utterly defeated, pretending to obey Kazuko greatly increased the odds of saving someone later.

—So this is Hiroshi's style of hero.

Lily watched Brave leave the room and then she fell unconscious.

Brave flew outside and used his recharged energy to hunt down the demonic beasts that were beginning to attack the people in an uncontrolled rampage.

The people cheered as Brave protected the empress from the army of the demon king.

Meanwhile, the priests were arrested by the L'Isle-Adams and knights.

None of the cheering people could have imagined what expression lay below Brave's mask at that moment.

"I have captured those who have opposed our august empress! The remnants will be hunted down before long, but Her Majesty has graciously decided to forgive them! Please remember to hate the sin but not the sinner!" announced Brave.

It took a day and a half for the shuttle to return to Earth. It had originally been meant for only Keisu, so it had contained no food. During that day and a half, Keena, Junko, and Yoshie had been forced to survive only on the little bit of water available, but they had been depressed enough that they were unlikely to have eaten even if there had been food.

"The dock has refused to accept us," said Keisu after communicating with the dock.

The shuttle had entered orbit around the earth. Refusing them was a big deal and these were the people who had maintained the shuttle before it left.

"I guess Kazuko's influence has reached them."

Yoshie always sounded lighthearted, but her voice was heavy now.

"Then…"

Junko began to say something that would produce dark speculation, so she stopped.

"Let's head down to the surface," instructed Yoshie. "This shuttle can reenter the atmosphere, after all. But there are no aircraft that use runways anymore, so finding a place to land will be hard. …I guess there's the crater in the center of the city. It'll be a bit rough, but it's better than in a forest or on the ocean."

Keisu nodded.

"Understood, boss. Everyone, return to your seats and strap in."

The shuttle descended toward the planet. Its wings slid through the atmosphere and it landed in the several hundred meter crater.

Before the hatch even opened, L'Isle-Adams were visibly beginning to surround the shuttle.

"Do we have to fight again?" asked Junko with a cynical smile.

However, her expression tensed up when she looked in front of the shuttle.

Hiroshi was floating there.

"Please do not resist. You will be treated well," he said.

"Did you betray us!?"

Junko clenched her fists, but Hiroshi wordlessly turned his back.

"Say something!"

She shouted angrily, but he did not turn toward her. She tried to jump out toward him, but Yoshie held her back.

"This means we lost. If we obey here, we might not be killed. Look."

Yoshie pointed toward the city.

Beyond the crater, the city had returned to everyday life. However, L'Isle-Adams were monitoring the people all the while. No one gathered to watch the shuttle. The people must have been instructed to stay away.

That scene told Junko they had truly lost.

"You mean it's all over!?" she shouted.

"Please don't think badly of him."

Lily was actually lowering her head for once.

"But president..."

Junko was clearly displeased.

A few days had passed since the shuttle had returned. Lily, Fujiko, and those from the shuttle were confined to the girls' dorm of Constant Magic Academy.

How they were to be dealt with was under consideration. They were all legally minors and all but Yoshie were students. The headmaster had not fought back during the whole ordeal, so his appeal on their behalf had helped. They were currently under house arrest until they were called to court. Naturally, they all understood that this kind treatment hid some ulterior motive.

"We're going to be brainwashed, aren't we? Are you telling us to forgive him because he was brainwashed ahead of us?"

Junko glared angrily at the president.

"No. He wasn't brainwashed," denied Lily.

They were all sitting in the cafeteria. They had nothing to do, so they continued to repeat the same arguments with the same results.

"Being a hero is tough. That is one way of carrying justice."

Lily shook her head. A mana screen in front of her was showing Brave's actions. When the priests would cause sporadic resistance, he would capture them unharmed. When the released demonic beasts would appear, he would slay them with a single strike.

"From what I have heard, I must agree to a certain extent," said Fujiko in Hiroshi's defense. "While he is not on Akuto-sama's level, he is doing this for everyone's sake. I do not like it, but I would have been killed if it was not for him."

"I know that… But no one knows what is really happening. They just let this insane empress rule over them. I cannot imagine allowing it to happen."

As Junko watched the same old images shown on the screen, she leaned weakly back in her chair.

The announcer excitedly stated that Kazuko would soon hold a ceremony to announce the restoration of order and her own rule.

"Everyone thinks it's strange, but time goes on and no one does anything about it," complained Yoshie. "Even if they think there is a hidden truth, that inquisitiveness is used by a liar who claims to know the truth. This leads people to believe in two contradictory things. Ask anyone and they'll probably tell you they don't like the idea of the empress's dictatorship but that it won't be a problem if things go well. And yet this is no different from when Zero was in control."

"That's because they go to the L'Isle-Adams when they're in trouble. The empress may be controlling Zero, but Zero has permeated the will of the gods too much. The people are merely controlled by something like they were during that month. And with Keisu taken away, there's nothing we can do."

Lily stared up at the ceiling.

"Can we expect any help from Hiroshi-kun?" asked Yoshie.

But Lily looked doubtful.

"I'm sure he's waiting for an opportunity, but he's actually binding himself by thinking his actions are for the people. Honestly, the role of law and order is so confining. You're forced to obey the indefinite monster known as popularity and people's opinions. No matter how rotten something is, you have to bow down to it so long as it's popular. If you don't, you can't protect the people."

Hearing that, Yoshie smiled bitterly.

"So whether we're brainwashed or not, do we have no choice but to obey until the early end of our lives? Of course, living life indoors is not a problem for me."

"Can't the House of the Lords do something during the Diet's next election? Then again, I feel like that has always been more a place for churches to fight with each other rather than for democracy."

"To the normal citizens, it is all a struggle for political power that is none of their concern. That is why it was necessary that we freed magic for everyone," explained Fujiko with a cynical smile.

Lily gave an identical smile.

"True. All of us are in different positions and think differently. It's like a bad joke that we're all sitting here discussing this."

"But we'll have to fall silent eventually," said Yoshie.

None of them could say anything in response, so silence fell.

That silence was finally broken by Keena who had said nothing until now.

"No! We can't do that! We can't stay silent!"

She banged on the table and stood up.

"But what are we supposed to do?"

"We did everything we could."

"We can only wait for Hiroshi to do something."

"I don't know what Brave can do, but it's true we can only wait."

They all spoke as if rebuking Keena.

But Keena vigorously shook her head.

"No! If all we do is wait, no one will do anything! The people who are doing their best and the amazing people need someone to call out to them! If we don't do that, nothing will happen! You have to tell them to watch!"

As she spoke, Keena began stripping off her clothes.

"Wait. What are you doing?"

Junko held out a hand, but Keena slipped past it.

"I can't remain silent!" she shouted.

In no time at all, she had stripped naked and vanished.

"Wait! You can't just disappear!"

"Sure, you may be able to move freely…"

"But it will increase our crimes when we are left behind. …Then again, I suppose that does not matter now. Why not just let her do what she wants?"

Fujiko and the others called after Keena for a bit, but they stopped after receiving no response.

After a short delay, a window opened near the ceiling.

"Oh, she just left."

"She'll get hungry and come back. She's been doing nothing but cry and eat bowls of rice."

"The sky is so clear… He must still be fighting up on the moon beyond that sky," commented Yoshie blankly.

However, a few days passed and Keena did not return. It seemed a search party was formed, but they discovered nothing.

Junko and the others remained confined, but one morning they were brought to view Kazuko officially announcing the return of law and order. They were given restraining bracelets which would provide an electric shock if they strayed beyond a set area and they were forced to attend the ceremony.

"I feel just like a prisoner."

"That is because we are prisoners."

"Are we going to be publicly shamed at the ceremony?"

"We might be made to announce our change of heart and willingness to cooperate with Kazuko. If we refuse, we'll be publicly executed. Of course, they won't execute us on the spot. We're cute girls, after all," said Yoshie cynically.

L'Isle-Adams brought them to the city center.

The crater in the center had been filled and levelled. It was nothing but dirt, but a temporary assembly area had been constructed. Chairs were laid out for the attendees and the surrounding area was decorated simply.

The location had been chosen as a symbol of recovery.

No one was left to oppose Kazuko and everything was going as she wished.

During the morning, the attending priests had arrived and were sitting obediently in their seats. These were the approximately half of the priests who had not taken part in the resistance. They were split between those who mocked the resistance and those who were embarrassed over waiting to see how it would turn out, so their conversations were perfectly harmless. But at that time, it was well known that Kazuko was using the L'Isle-Adams like a dictator, so all of the priests felt powerless.

A powerful and logical system was managing the humans while ignoring the individual wills of the people. No one knew what to say about the strange fact that an individual with power was controlling that system.

As long as the empress was popular with the people, all they could do was let the empress do what she wished and try to build up a system in which everyone could influence her. Even if that was not quite the same as justice, the priests had to believe that was the best they could do for the people.

Both the primitive system of control based on the story of the empress and the mechanically logical system of control that had freed itself from that had failed. Even if a hopeless society was all that remained afterwards, there was nothing they could do but pray.

Finally, the normal citizens began to gather. The empress could only be seen at the New Year's greeting or on her birthday. This announcement was a rare and therefore exciting event.

From the people's point of view, it was celebrating the end of both the L'Isle-Adams' rebellion and the renewed fear of the demon king war. Food stands were lined up in the streets and a celebratory mood filled the air.

Junko and the other girls sat in the very front. The L'Isle-Adams had relayed a demand that they not speak a word. They were to play the role of girls who had been tempted by the demon king but had had a change of heart.

The four of them sat silently, unable to even complain. Finally, noon arrived and the ceremony began.

When Kazuko appeared onstage, the excitement reached its peak. The gathered people let out a cheer and waved the imperial flag.

Decorative lights that produced mana light illuminated Kazuko and countless mana screens showed her to the crowd filling every inch of the streets.

"Our empire was in a dreadful state up until yesterday. Zero, the original demon king who could control the L'Isle-Adams, was accidentally awakened and he rebelled," she began.

The people hung on her every word. The streets were absolutely packed with people, but not even a single whisper could be heard coming from them.

"And then the demon king saw a chance to destroy the world. He took issue with Zero and the two of them began fighting. They ultimately caused an explosion great enough to destroy the palace and otherwise threatened people's lives."

Kazuko calmly altered history for her own convenience. Those who knew it was a lie had no definitive proof and were not allowed to speak out. The rest of the people felt fear at the grandness of that history.

"But we…yes, we won. I say 'we' because I had a reliable helper. I refer, of course, to Brave!"

Kazuko threw up her hands and indicated where Brave was floating.

The people gave him an enthusiastic welcome.

"He drove the two demon kings to the moon. Yes, that moon above our heads. We no longer must fear the threat of the demon king and the L'Isle-Adams are free once more."

A group of L'Isle-Adams waved while lined up on the stage to either side of Kazuko.

"They will no longer rebel. However, direct control from the empress is needed to ensure that."

With that, she raised her hands and produced the Yasakani no Magatama and the Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi. The crowd watched the mana sphere and sword of light.

"These two powers are the techniques passed down by the imperial family, the Yasakani no Magatami and the Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi. Only those of the legitimate imperial bloodline can use them and their use also requires that the Imperial Regalia reside within one's body. Also, the third and final technique is the Yata no Kagami."

Kazuko brought her hands together and produced a mana mirror.

"This technique allows one to speak with the gods at the core of the L'Isle-Adams. As long as I possess this, the L'Isle-Adams can never again rebel. Also, the priests will no longer be the only ones to speak with the gods. To revive an ancient and beautiful tradition, I will speak directly with the gods for the sake of society."

Her words elicited a great cheer.

Even though she was essentially announcing her dictatorial rule, no one could raise their voice in protest, so it was assumed to already be an established fact.

Junko and the others listened to it with doubt in their hearts. Lily bit her lip so hard it bled.

Amid the festival mood, they alone felt despair.

"In ancient times, the gods were natural things and nations were families. In modern times, all of that has grown much more complex and changed form. The gods now manage our lives and are much more manmade. But there are some things which have not changed: we must speak with the gods and, more importantly, we must think of everyone as our family. I am the matriarch of this empire and I wish to fulfill the duties of that role," said Kazuko calmly.

The despair in Junko and the others' hearts only grew heavier. Their only hope was not something they could reach for themselves. They could only wait for a miracle.

Was it all over?

Was there no hope left?

Would no miracle occur?

"Then let me ask you this: what should the family do when their matriarch has made a mistake?"

A new voice asked a sudden question.

That voice drowned out Kazuko's voice which was being broadcast from the many mana screens.

"Wha-…?"

"It can't be…"

The people recognized the voice.

That was the voice of the boy who had terrorized them with that giant explosion.

"It can't be…"

Junko and the girls muttered the same thing.

But they meant it in a completely different way.

For them, hearing that voice meant a miracle had occurred.

"It can't be…"

"Did someone record his voice?'

"Is it an imitator?"

They whispered among themselves.

As if to answer their questions, all of the mana screens suddenly displayed an image of him.

Look, it seemed to say.

Look at the boy in the sky.

He looked down at the people as if to prove that miracles did indeed happen.

"I will answer for you: the children do not choose the head of their family, so they have that head retire from her position when she makes a mistake," said Akuto.

An uproar fell over the people gathered in the city center. They panicked and sought a means of escape.

To calm them, Kazuko spoke even louder than Akuto.

"While the head of a family may make mistakes, the empress cannot! Do not worry, everyone! Brave will not lose to this demon!"

She called for Brave from the stage. At the same time, she pointed toward Junko and the other girls so only he could see. She was reminding him that their restraints could send out electric shocks.

Brave nodded.

And he rose up into the sky.

Brave…no, Hiroshi had no worries or hesitation. He simply had to use all of his power against Akuto. He was confident that Akuto would break past that power.

"After causing this miracle, you can easily defeat me, right?"

He grinned below his helmet, spoke so only Akuto could hear, and charged toward him.

But Akuto shook his head.

"Sorry, but this miracle wasn't my doing," said Akuto evasively. "So how about you fight the one responsible?"

"Eh?"

Hiroshi's confusion turned to surprise as a naked girl suddenly appeared in his path.

"Wah!"

He tried to stop, but his momentum sent him crashing into the girl.

"Ow!" cried Keena.

"You can play with this hostage!" shouted Akuto so everyone could hear him.

He then slipped past Hiroshi and Keena and descended. On his way past, he removed his coat and placed it over Keena.

"I see."

Hiroshi understood, so he put on act of trying to decide whether to pursue Akuto or not. He then descended in order to place Keena safely on the

ground. Kazuko could not complain because the act was necessary to maintain the people's high opinion of Brave.

As he watched Hiroshi descend, Akuto continued his descent toward Kazuko.

"Can you not see that?" asked Kazuko via telepathy.

She was pointing at Junko and the other girls.

"The restraints? That's just cruel. Unfortunately for you, they won't work," he replied confidently.

"Do not be ridiculous."

She waved her hand, but they would not activate.

"Why!?"

"Because I am controlling the mana," he answered casually.

"But I should be able to do the same. Zero is under my-…"

She trailed off in confusion.

"Impossible! Zero! Why…Why won't you answer me!?"

"He saw a miracle and realized he was mistaken."

"Do not be ridiculous!"

She looked up at Akuto in the air and produced a sword of light in her hand. It shined just as brightly as before, but the light looked somehow empty.

"Resistance is useless," warned Akuto as he accelerated down toward her.

"Impossible! Impossible! There is nothing you can do! Not you! You are nothing but a weapon! You are just an abominable combat machine!"

She cast away the kind smile and cried out with the expression of a wild beast.

"Impossible! There are no miracles! Die, you demon king!"

Akuto shouted back.

"Regret what you have done, empress!"

Akuto become a bolt of lightning that scattered fear as he shot toward Kazuko.

She fired the sword of light upwards.

A tremendous flash of light burst out, but it was not caused by the sword of light. Akuto fully grasped the mana. He eliminated her sword and released a great light to hide the cruel scene from the people's eyes.

A great roar and a great light burst out and spread in every direction like a wave, but the damage was limited to the very center.

It was over in an instant.

Akuto stood triumphantly on the stage at the center of the people's attention. Kazuko stood unsteadily in front of him. A very small crater had appeared at her feet. She had been struck from above.

But she was still alive. Her mind was hazy and blood flowed from her forehead, but she turned toward Akuto and raised her hand to attack.

She had cast all else aside, so she had nothing but destruction left.

"If you agree to retire, I will let you live," he said.

Those words brought a smile to her face.

"The empress does not take orders from anyone."

"Hah. I can't appreciate that way of living," he said coldly.

And someone else climbed up onto the stage.

"Demon king!"

It was Lily. She stretched out her arm toward him in her unique attack.

Akuto took the blow on the chest. It caused no apparent damage, but he pretended to falter and he jumped back.

Akuto understood what Lily was doing. He had to play the role of demon king here or the people would fall into confusion.

"That's quite the punch," he said.

She looked up at him.

"Don't joke around. What did you do to the empress!?"

"The empress and Zero were trying to control me and my power, so I came here to get rid of her. Do not forget that the demon king and his power belong to no one."

He spoke so everyone could hear.

Lily circled around to face Kazuko.

"Is it true you tried to free the demon king's power? That is the same reason why the priests and I rebelled. We accused you of creating a dictatorship using Zero's power."

Lily was attempting to inform the people of the truth.

Kazuko did not affirm or deny the accusation. She simply gave a disagreeable smile and spoke.

"If the imperial bloodline dies off, no one will be able to use the Imperial Regalia. No one will be able to prove whether those regalia can be used to freely control Zero's power."

In her speech, she had only claimed they let her "speak with the gods". As far as the general public knew, that was the Yata no Kagami's only power. No one would be able to disprove her lie if she died.

"Wait."

Realizing what Kazuko was after, Lily held out her hand. Akuto had not taken her life, but now that her plans had been destroyed, she could at least protect the story of the empress and demon king by taking her own life.

"Call a doctor! Brave! Take the empress to a hospital!" called Lily.

She held a hand to Kazuko's neck, but it was too late.

Even as she stood, Kazuko was already dead.

"Tch!"

Lily bit her lip.

The crowd filled with noise. The normal people muttered uneasily and the priests gave mental cheers of joy.

The original world would return.

Humans would be managed by the system of the gods. It was not perfect, but the world had found no better system.

But those who had worked to bring that world back would be viewed as heretics under that system.

Akuto had worked in secret to bring this about, but he alone could not return to his old life when the old world returned. The gods needed to be destroyed, but that time had not yet come. It would not come as long as the people relied on the system they believed was the best. And as long as that system continued, he would continue to be the demon king.

He then began the final part of his act.

"Do not forget the fear you felt today! I will be watching you all no matter where you are!"

Before his echoing words vanished, he rose into the sky and vanished.

Before one of the greatest shocks in imperial history had faded away, an even greater commotion began.

A crowd of people was gathered around the standing corpse of the empress. They parted to form an opening for Hiroshi who descended while carrying Keena. Only the palace doctor could confirm the empress's death. Her body had to be carried there.

Hiroshi lowered Keena to the ground while she wore Akuto's coat and he approached the empress.

She stood with her eyes closed and a trail of blood leaked from her mouth. Her body suddenly trembled and he watched closely, briefly thinking she had come back to life. However, something else was happening. Several hard masses of mana slipped out from her body. A small sword left her mouth, a small and round mirror left her chest, and a green magatama left her right arm. These were clearly the Imperial Regalia that were passed down via the imperial bloodline.

They flew through the air of their own will and flew toward Hiroshi.

"Eh? Eh?"

He panicked, but the Imperial Regalia flew past him.

And all three of them slipped into Akuto's coat and into Keena's body.

"Eh? Eh? Eh?"

These sounds of surprise came from Keena herself.

"Wh-what is going on!? Let me see!"

Surprised, Lily stretched a hand out toward Keena and tried to remove the coat.

"Kyah! Wait! I'm not wearing anything underneath!"

"Shut up! This is serious! What did you do!?"

Lily tried to forcibly rip off the coat.

"Nooooo!"

The instant Keena shouted out, Lily was blown backwards.

"Gh!" she grunted lightly.

She shook her head, sat up, and realized with astonishment what had knocked her flying.

"Is that…!?"

The mana spheres Kazuko had used were flying around Keena's body.

"That can't be… That would mean…"

Lily was dumbfounded and everyone else fell silent as well.

"Eh? Really?"

Keena held out her right hand as if she could barely believe it herself. With a roar, a sword of light appeared in it.

Only one with imperial blood could use the Imperial Regalia. That was common knowledge and Kazuko herself had announced it earlier. Which meant…

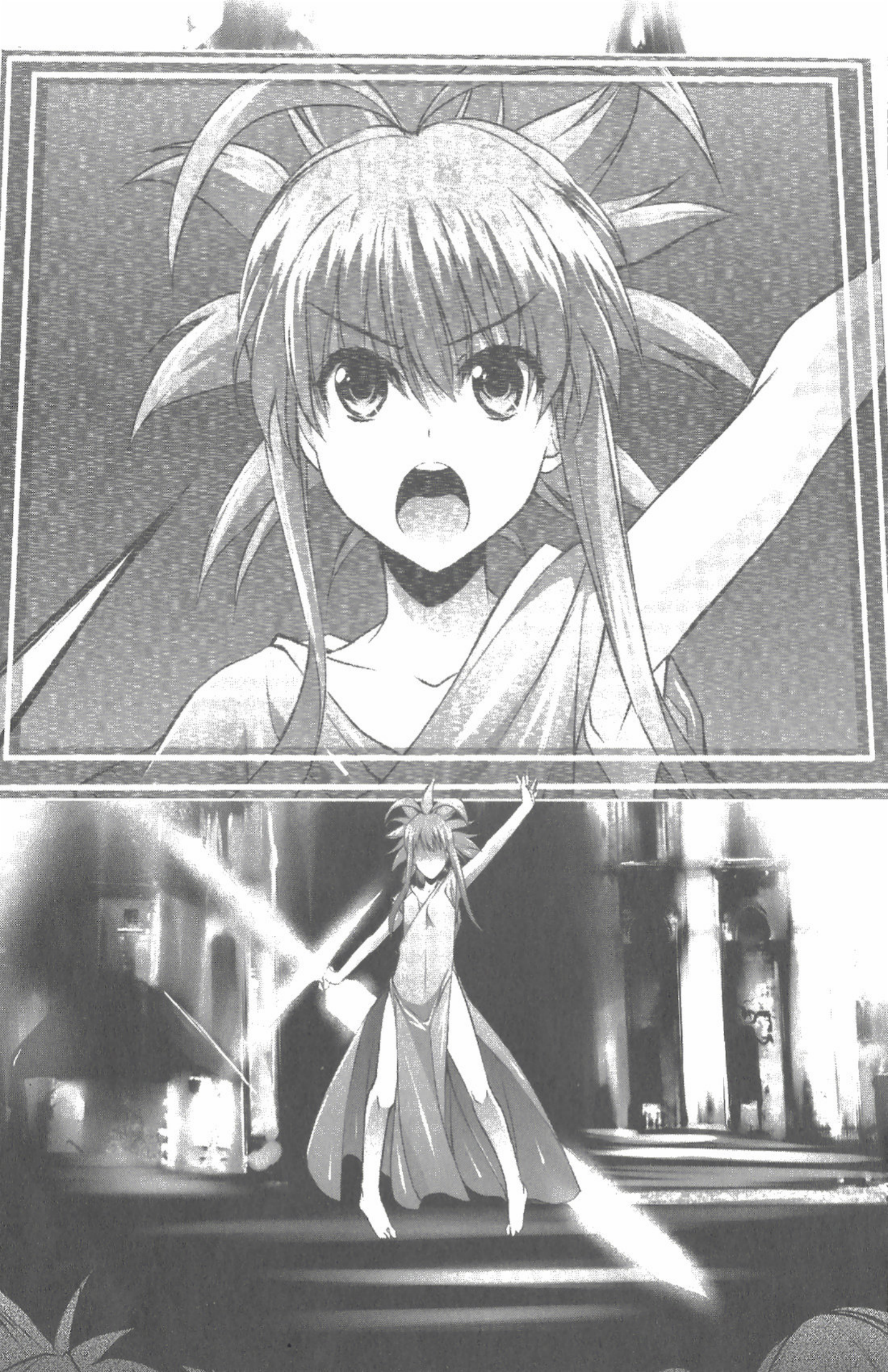
"Y-Your Majesty!" cried someone.

The chamberlains and knights, who should have rushed in to save Kazuko, all fell to their knees.

"Um… What am I supposed to do?"

Keena hesitated.

Lily stood up, walked back over, and whispered in her ear.



"Only you can settle this issue. This will help Sai Akuto as well."

Hearing that, Keena realized this was no time for hesitation. She shook her head and stiffened her face.

"Everyone, it seems I am of the imperial bloodline," she declared.

The mana screens displayed her face for the crowd.

The look in her eyes changed and her voice gained a dignity one would never have expected of her.

"Now that I have inherited the Imperial Regalia, I understand something. The previous empress used the power of this mirror to resurrect Zero and was attempting to make his power her own. The result was the battle you all witnessed. As such, I now retract everything the previous empress said!"

"What exactly happened?"

"What is going on? Where did Akuto-sama go?"

"The palace and churches need to be rebuilt. You need to hurry up and give approval as empress."

"This has gotten interesting, don't you think? You had imperial blood and didn't even know it. And you were an orphan, right? It's so exciting."

"I can't answer all of you at once!" wailed Keena.

Junko, Fujiko, Lily, and Yoshie were all speaking over each other. After the announcement, they had convinced the chamberlains to let Keena join them in a nearby building by saying they had a change of clothes for her.

"First, tell us what happened in order," said Junko.

Keena nodded.

"First, I flew."

"You flew? Oh, when you disappeared and left the girls' dorm. What happened after that?"

"Like I said, I flew."

"I know that. You flew away from the dorm. But how did you meet up with Akuto?"

"I went to get him," said Keena.

The rest of them were dumbfounded.

"Eh?"

"On the moon."

"You went to get him? On the moon?"

"Yeah. I flew. I knew I had to go to him, so I flew."

"Through space?"

"Yeah."

"While naked?"

"Yeah. No one was watching, so I didn't have to stay invisible."

"That isn't the issue!"

"Yeah, but…I did it."

The others clearly did not believe her, but that did not change the result. Akuto had indeed returned.

"Well, it's possible this Akuto is an illusion. Where did he go?" asked Lily.

Keena's expression turned dark.

"He knew he had to defeat the empress, so he said he wouldn't be able to appear in public again."

Junko's expression turned dark as well.

"You mean…"

"He was prepared. He said he would go to the moon or somewhere once it was over."

"That is…a problem."

"Yeah. I know. That's why it's perfect that I became empress."

"Perfect?"

"Let's call A-chan back to the school!"

Keena made it sound much too simple, but no one rejected the idea.

"Can you really do that?"

"It does not matter. We must bring him back," said Fujiko.

"I guess it isn't all that selfish compared to the previous empress. But there's going to be a lot of confusion in the near future. There were too many sacrifices," said Lily as she opened the door.

Zero slept peacefully in the city on the moon.

He himself had chosen to fall dormant.

Before falling asleep, he had gazed upon the wasteland of the moon. That was the first time that rocky wasteland had appeared beautiful to him.

During his days-long battle with Akuto, a girl had arrived after he had lost interest in counting how many blows they had exchanged.

A light had fallen on the wasteland of the moon and bright red hair and white skin had followed.

"There is a truth unique to humans," the demon king had said.

No, it had been the human side of Akuto who had said that.

A flesh-and-blood human had flown through space. Of course, the very fact that such a thing was possible may have meant she was not human, but that did not matter. What had descended to the surface of the moon was a truth that exceeded the truth of living creatures. Something great had descended there.

"Is this the miracle to which you referred?"

"It is. If that is not a miracle, what is it?"

"Is that the story to which you referred?"

"Yes. That is the great, foolish story that can bring an end to stories."

As the two of them had spoken, they had both stopped fighting. When faced with such a ridiculous reality, their fistfight had lost all meaning.

Zero and Akuto had clasped hands. That had allowed them to continue speaking in the airless space without fighting.

"Then is that what you call love?"

"Yes. There is something great there and it loves mankind. That is the kind of story it is. It may be foolish, but if you do not believe in it, countless small and incorrect stories will hurt people."

"Are you saying even I am loved by that kind of existence?"

"Yes. There are some who slip from the hand of love like spilled grains of rice, but they were certainly loved at the moment of their creation," Akuto had said.

Zero had nodded.

"Return. She has come for you, so you must go with her."

"What about you?"

"I will sleep. I will leave the management of mankind to all of you."

"That management is your job. Are you no longer intent on carrying it out?"

"I will not say all of my management is meaningless, but I understand now that I was wrong. If I continue managing mankind, my mistakes will only grow. I have merely made the logical decision."

"In that case, there is no need for you to sleep. You can stay awake."

"I do not want to be used by the empress. She is even more mistaken than me."

"I'm pretty mistaken too, you know?"

"I am saying I have had enough of humans."

Akuto had understood that comment was a joke, so he had smiled.

"Okay. Goodbye then."

"Yes. We are quite similar, so return here if you lose your place back on the planet."

They had strengthened the grip of their handshake.

And then Zero had begun walking back toward his tower.

But he had turned around a moment later.

He appeared to say something, but Akuto had been unable to hear him.

However, Akuto knew what he had said.

"My friend."

That was what Zero had said.

Chapter 6: The Two who Returned

A luxurious black limousine was stopped in front of Constant Magic Academy. The flying limousine was meant for an important person and it looked out of place at a school.

The limousine's door opened and a chamberlain wearing black stepped out. He frantically ran over to the receptionist and asked a question that sounded silly at first.

"Is Her Majesty here? She stripped off her clothes and jumped out of the limousine!"

As if to lend credence to his story, the chamberlain held a dress.

The receptionist was used to this, so she checked the class attendance, tilted her head, and said she was not in class.

"Are you sure we cannot search inside?"

"That is the school policy."

The chamberlain and receptionist had held this exact conversation a few times before.

"Has the observer L'Isle-Adam still not arrived?"

"I was told she should arrive soon. Then you will not need to worry."

"I hope so… The new empress acts too freely. She can vanish…and while naked…"

The receptionist began to laugh.

"She really is our schools greatest problem student. …Oh, that may have been irreverent to Her Majesty. Plus, we have another problem student who may be even worse."

That second-greatest problem student was on the rooftop.

"Thanks."

After receiving a uniform and student handbook, she put the uniform on and made herself visible.

"Whew. I don't even have a palace yet and they're already making me live such a restricted life," complained Keena.

"I think the one being called out of class to bring you a uniform is more restricted," Junko complained back.

"Don't worry. I'll use my imperial authority to make sure you still get credit!"

Keena puffed her chest out proudly.

"That is not the issue!"

Junko waved her hands in denial.

Keena had lived as empress for a while now. Constant Magic Academy had been restored and a lot of other things had returned to normal as well. All the destroyed land was being rebuilt.

The media had initially been very curious about the life of the new empress, but they had been so shocked by Keena's free lifestyle that they were purposefully avoiding talking about her recently.

"So why are you here today?" asked Junko with her hands on her hips.

Keena pouted her lips.

"Ehh? I'm still a student, you know?"

"Yes, but you have not been around lately."

"Yeah. I was testing to see if I could use the Imperial Regalia." She nodded and smiled at Junko. "Also…"

"Also what? And on a side note, I am pretty sure those tests would be classified information. You should not just-…"

Despite Junko's complaint, Keena would not stop grinning and she cut Junko off with a loud voice.

"I can suppress A-chan's power!"

"What? What!?"

"I can keep him from being the demon king! I can make his powers go away!"

"W-wait. Is that true?"

"Yeah! So he can come back to school!"

Keena raised her hands as if calling Akuto down.

"Way to go, Keena!"

Junko hugged her.

That night, everyone gathered on the roof of the girls' dorm on Keena's command.

"So where is Akuto-sama and what is he doing?" asked Fujiko curiously.

"He says he's been in the forest reading books. He can peek at things all over the world, so I doubt he was bored," said Keena.

"That sounds like him. By the way, where is the student council president?" asked Junko.

"She said she isn't coming. She had wanted to defeat the previous empress herself, so she said she isn't happy with A-chan."

"But she tried and failed," said Junko with a bitter smile.

"I'm not a student and even I'm here," said Yoshie with a shrug.

Keena then pointed up into the sky.

"There he is!"

They all looked up into the sky and spread their arms.

Akuto was slowly descending.

Keena pulled out the coat he had given her, placed it over him, and then hugged him.

"Hey, he has not even greeted us yet!" complained Junko.

But Keena was not listening. She merely buried her face in Akuto's chest.

"Ah! No fair! Me too!"

Fujiko leaped toward Akuto as well. He fell over and almost toppled off the roof.

"I-I'll greet you, so how about you move away?" he said.

He tore the two girls from him, stood up, and scratched his head embarrassedly.

"Hi, everyone. I'm back."

"Welcome back!" replied the others.

Keena and Fujiko leaped at him again, Yoshie grinned as she watched them and elbowed Junko in the side while the other girl glared at Keena and Fujiko.

"You want to join them, don't you? How about you be honest with yourself?"

"D-do not be silly. I do not want to do that!"

Junko blushed and looked away.

"Sure, sure."

Yoshie laughed and rubbed Junko's head.

"Hey, stop! Why are you acting like that!?"

Junko complained, but Yoshie ignored her.

"Oh, right," said Yoshie suddenly. She clapped her hands to gather everyone's attention before continuing. "Okay, turn your focus over here. I have a present."

Once everyone was watching her, Yoshie pulled out Korone's bag.

A heavy atmosphere suddenly fell over the previously cheerful group.

"Ah…"

"Oh, right. Korone-chan…"

"Aren't you being a bit insensitive?"

Fujiko walked over toward Yoshie.

"And why are you calling that a present? I think the term 'memento' would be more-…"

She trailed off as a right hand stuck out of the bag. An entire body soon followed.

"Eh?"

Fujiko was dumbfounded.

"Korone!" cried Akuto.

"Korone-chan!" said Keena and Junko in unison.

Once the legs had left the bag, it was indeed Korone who stood before Akuto.

"Just before jumping into the transfer circle, I grabbed her head and stuck it in the bag. I knew I could repair her then," said Yoshie. "I secretly made the repairs and switched her on, but I still don't know if she has her memories or not. I didn't know her very well, so I need to ask her. So do you have your memories?"

For some reason Yoshie's question led Korone to blush and point toward Akuto.

"I have memories of a passionate night with him."

"Yeah, that's definitely Korone."

Akuto gave an exasperated smile.

"Yes, I am back."

Korone gave a rare smile and embraced Akuto.

"C'mon, enough with the bad jokes."

"This is not a joke. You loved me even though I was a L'Isle-Adam. I must respond to those feelings," said Korone in a perfectly serious voice.

"Wait… Love…?"

Akuto grew flustered.

Korone looked up at Akuto.

"When I say that, do I look like a pure girl? I have a new body which you could call a virgin body, so I thought I would act like a virgin."

"Y'know…"

Akuto gave a sullen look, but Korone made no attempt to remove her arms from around his waist. He ultimately decided to place a hand on her head.

"Well, you did seem pure."

"I see. Oh, I just remembered." Korone turned toward Keena. "I have been made the empress's observer, so you can expect to see a lot of me."

"Really!?" asked Keena as her expression crumbled.

"Yes, really."

"Yay! Welcome back…no, welcome to your new job, Korone-chan!"

With that exclamation, Keena hugged Korone.

The two of them then almost fell from the roof and Akuto saved them. All of them began laughing and those on the top floor of the girls' dorm began banging on the ceiling to quiet them down.

"There was no need for the empress to switch out like that," complained Kento.

He lay on a couch in his room while speaking with a man displayed on a mana screen.

"You think you are so smart. You make it sound like everything should always go exactly as you expect it to," said the man in the screen.

He had a bald head and strangely black and rubber-like skin. His codename was Rubbers. He was a member of CIMO 8 and had once taken part in a battle at Constant Magic Academy.

"That's right. Everything goes as I expect it to more often than not," calmly stated Kento.

"Then did you know CIMO 8's numbers were going to fall so far?" accused Rubbers.

"That is due to the mistakes of those individual members. However, it is hard even for me to predict what our next move should be."

"Because of the new empress?"

"Yes. That has made it harder to see what is needed to clear the Final Judgment."

"I see you intend to diligently carry out Bouichirou's final request."

"I will pull it off better than he could have hoped to himself. Unlike him, I have no personal feelings involved."

"Then why are you finding it harder to see what to do? I thought you were going to do this perfectly?"

Rubbers's provocation caused no change in Kento's expression.

"The problem is this irregular situation. There must be a few other people with imperial blood. This will get troublesome if they show up wanting the throne."

"I have no interest in being emperor."

"Neither do I. We agree on that, if nothing else. But we must be allies of the emperor who wins in the end."

With that comment, Kento ended the call.

Afterword

Thank you as always. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

Volume 9 continues from last time. The story has reached a conclusion for the time being. A lot has happened, but I would like to celebrate completing all this writing. Hooray!

But there is more to come and I have a large story planned. I need to get fired up, but I think the next volume will be a collection of slice of life short stories. I hope I can show what happens to Yoshie and provide a surprising story about the student council. If you like less brutal stories, you can look forward to this one.

Also, the anime should be beginning soon.

If you bought this new, you can see the information on the advertisement. Otherwise, you can check the website.

I am writing this afterword well in advance, so I haven't seen anything but a voice recording. That was plenty fun though, so I hope you're looking forward to this.

The recording was very enjoyable.

Korone's VA, Yuuki Aoi-san, treated me to handmade chiffon cake.

Torii Mitsuko's VA, Takashi Chiaki-san, and Fujiko's VA, Itou Shizuka-san, were both cheering on Yuuki Aoi-san's very sexy performance.

I also saw all the voice actors gathering around Yuuki Aoi-san to take a picture.

I have a feeling I'm focusing too much on one person, but maybe I'm just imagining it.

Anyway, I'm sure we caused some trouble when everyone related to the novel end of things showed up, but I think you readers can tell how much fun it was.

Time to talk about something pointless. While watching the Winter Olympics on TV as usual, I found myself enjoying the curling. I was a bit disappointed to find out it is a sport with very limited places and situations

in which it can be played. It can't just be a casual hobby. But I can imagine people playing it while drinking in a pub in Canada. I imagine it's like billiards here in Japan. The world sure is a vast place. Then again, drinking on an icy rink while swinging around stones and brushes seems a bit dangerous.

Lastly, my thanks.

More and more people are involved now, so I'm not even aware of all of them and I can't greet all of them. Thank you all the same, though. I am always grateful.

To my editor Ohashi-sama, you stuck with me to increase the quality this time, so I thank you. I learned a lot.

And most importantly, I must thank Itou Souichi-san. I am sure my constant tardiness causes him trouble, but it is reassuring to see him putting up an unthinkable fight as he also checks on the various developments related to the manga version.

And I of course thank all you readers for supporting me this far. Please continue supporting me. There's a lot more to enjoy!

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